


# KALAN TITHA

THE EMBROIDERED QUILTS OF BENGAL







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KANTHA







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THE EMBROIDERED QUILTS OF BENGAL

from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection  
and the Stella Kramrisch Collection  
of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

EDITED BY DARIELLE MASON

With essays by Pika Ghosh, Katherine Hacker,  
Darielle Mason, Anne Peranteau, and Niaz Zaman

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The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection  
PAGE VI: Detail of kantha (plate 52).  
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## Foreword

Created from fragments of old family garments and recycled threads, kanthas evoke memories of the past. Made to celebrate marriages and births, these beautifully embroidered Bengali quilts also invoke hopes for the future. At a time when the Philadelphia Museum of Art remembers its rich heritage while embarking on a new phase of its development, this publication and the exhibition it accompanies seem particularly appropriate.

Stella Kramrisch is a legendary figure in the history of South Asian art. In 1939, while a professor at the University of Calcutta, she introduced kanthas as an art form in a groundbreaking essay that is reproduced in this volume. In 1968, as a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she brought these “everyday” women’s quilts into the hallowed realm of a fine arts museum, displaying them alongside other treasures from the region in the remarkable and hugely successful exhibition titled *Unknown India*. During Dr. Kramrisch’s tenure of nearly forty years at this institution, she assembled one of the foremost public collections of South Asian art in the United States and produced a series of influential exhibitions. Among the many personal donations and bequests she made to the Museum is her renowned collection of fifty-two kanthas, all of which are reproduced in this volume.

Sheldon Bonovitz, Chairman Emeritus and CEO of Duane Morris LLP and a long-serving Trustee of the Museum, and Jill Bonovitz, a distinguished ceramic artist, were introduced to kanthas in part through Kramrisch’s writings. The lively and personalized images found in these textiles struck a chord with the couple, whose primary collecting passion is American self-taught art, and inspired them to form a collection that now numbers thirty-three quilts and is superb in both its quality and its variety. Like many of the self-taught artists the Bonovitzes have collected—such as James Castle, whose 2008–9 retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art owed so much to the couple’s interest and support—the women who

embroidered kanthas typically went unrecognized as artists during their lifetimes.

After forming their collection of kanthas, the Bonovitzes displayed many of these quilts, together with works by self-taught artists, in Duane Morris’s Philadelphia office. Soon, however, they recognized not only the importance of their collection, but also the need to bring these little-known works—and artists—to the attention of the public. It is due to their extraordinary insight, inspiration, and generosity that this book and the accompanying exhibition have come into being, and for that we would like to express our deepest appreciation. They were joined in this effort by the Coby Foundation, Ltd., for whose crucial support we are enormously grateful.

Each of the kanthas collected by the Bonovitzes, like those acquired by Kramrisch, displays great individuality in both type and motif. Yet while the two collections share a focus on figural imagery, as a group the Bonovitzes’ kanthas are very different in character from Kramrisch’s. By bringing these two collections together we can begin to appreciate the remarkable technical skill and wide range of artistic expression that Bengali women brought to the medium.

From the start, my esteemed predecessor, Anne d’Harnoncourt, enthusiastically embraced the Bonovitzes’ idea for this collection catalogue and exhibition, just as she had enthusiastically supported the work of Dr. Kramrisch and the Museum’s Department of Indian and Himalayan Art during her distinguished tenure as Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Associate Director of Collections Alice Beamesderfer’s superb organizational abilities made light of all initial logistical complexities. As Interim Head of Curatorial Affairs following d’Harnoncourt’s tragic death, she gracefully brought the project to fruition with the strong support of Gail Harrity, the Museum’s Interim Chief Executive Officer.

Appropriately, this catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies have been organized by the Stella



Kramrisch Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art, Darielle Mason, whose keen intellect, passion, and commitment to the project would certainly have been appreciated by her celebrated predecessor. She and I are deeply grateful to the four scholars whose many contributions to this publication—both as essayists and as advisors—provide it with authority and richness: Pika Ghosh, Katherine Hacker, Anne Peranteau, and Niaz Zaman, and to the many individuals in Bangladesh, India, Great Britain, and the United States who assisted in a host of ways. I would like to express our thanks to Jo Ellen Ackerman of Bessas & Ackerman for the elegant design, and to Lynne Shaner for the preliminary editing. In the Museum's renowned Publishing Department, David Updike provided thoughtful editorial care and expertise, and Richard Bonk oversaw the production and printing of the catalogue with his customary skill and attention to detail. Graydon Wood, the Museum's senior photographer, created the superb images that bring the catalogue to life and vividly convey a sense of the richly textured surfaces of these wonderful quilts. Virginia Whelan lent her

great knowledge of embroidery techniques to furnish stitch identification. Dilys Blum, Senior Curator of Costume and Textiles, and Sara Reiter, Conservator of Costume and Textiles, provided expertise as well as logistical and technical assistance for both the catalogue and the exhibition.

Through the magnificent gift of the kanthas they have acquired, on the occasion of this publication and exhibition the Bonovitzes merge their collection with that donated by Stella Kramrisch to constitute the most significant holdings of these quilts outside of South Asia. Dr. Kramrisch wrote that "the kantha is a creative process of integration within each woman." Collecting is likewise a process of creative integration by individuals, and the Museum itself is the integration of the many distinguished collections developed and then given to this institution by many generous donors over the past 134 years. The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection of kanthas will enrich immeasurably the Museum as a whole, as they will enrich the experience of future generations of artists, scholars, and visitors.

TIMOTHY RUB

*The George D. Widener Director and  
Chief Executive Officer*



## A Note to the Reader

**Transliteration and language:** For the sake of accessibility, diacritical marks have been avoided with the exceptions of direct quotations and reprinted material. We recognize the occasional ambiguity this produces, especially in inscriptions, but hope that it is outweighed by easier reading. While we have worked to spell the same words consistently throughout, we have followed no strict guidelines in choosing Bangla versus Sanskrit spellings. In general, familiar names appear in their accepted anglicized forms, while pan-Indic deities and other terms have, for the most part, been rendered in Sanskrit (e.g., ‘v’ as opposed to ‘b’; retaining the terminal ‘a’), while more regionally specific and everyday terms have been rendered with Bangla spellings (although we have utilized the neutral ‘a’ rather than the Bangla spoken ‘o’).

**Dating and regional attributions:** Very few kanthas are inscribed with their date and place of manufacture; more retain a provenance recorded by their collectors. Because the kanthas in these collections were likely made within a relatively short time span (about a century) and mostly within a relatively small regional range, when neither inscription nor provenance is present, assigning a precise date and sub-regional designation on the basis of style, materials, or technique is extremely problematic. The information accompanying the plates is thus of two types. For pieces from Stella Kramrisch's collection that she published in her lifetime, we have retained her regional attribution—and often her date—and noted her as the source with “SK” in parentheses. For other pieces, unless inscribed, we have given a generic provenance of “Undivided Bengal,” and the curator has provided a range of dates based solely on her own sense of relative chronology. The designation “Undivided Bengal” refers to the British administrative unit of Bengal

between the two partitions (1911–47), the territory equivalent to present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. While not all of these quilts were produced during this time, the term was chosen as the simplest way to indicate the region from which we believe all or at least the vast majority did originate. While Bengal was undivided prior to the first partition in 1905, it included a far larger territory.

**Shape/use terms:** Terms for specific types of kanthas according to size, shape, and function (e.g., *bayton*, *ashan*, *sujni*, *arshilata*) were only occasionally recorded from early practitioners and have not been used consistently throughout the scholarship. Thus, while such terms have been retained in the essays as each contributor has chosen to use them, they have not been used in the captions (and rarely in the didactic information) accompanying the plates.

**Border and stitch terms:** The many Bangla terms for border motifs and stitches are descriptive and often wonderfully evocative. They also vary—and apparently varied—according to a practitioner's personal lineage, regional norms, and the like. While some of these terms have been discussed, no attempt has been made to standardize them or to list Bangla names for either borders or stitches. However, Virginia Whelan has identified all stitches used on each kantha following the standard vocabulary of *Mary Thomas's Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches* (see the appendix following Anne Peranteau's essay), and her list is included in the caption for each plate.

**Inscriptions:** The stitched inscriptions on kanthas are often difficult to decipher; missing and ill-formed letters elicit educated guesses that may legitimately differ from scholar to

scholar. Likewise, each scholar may differently nuance her or his translation of the same phrase. We feel that these interpretive variations also nuance our understanding and thus have not tried to force a uniform reading but have retained each scholar's wording in essays and notes, although limited space required the choice of a single reading to accompany the relevant plates.

**Plates:** Sizes in inches and centimeters accompany each plate, but the images are not reproduced to scale in order to maximize the size of the photograph given for each piece. All kanthas have been photographed from the working side (“obverse”) with the exception of plates 8 (worked from both sides) and 16 (to highlight the later inscriptions on the reverse).

Since the majority of kanthas in these collections display motifs organized radially around the central lotus, choices on orientation were made on a piece-by-piece basis to highlight important or interesting motifs, or those not presented as individual details in other parts of the volume. Unless showing a decided horizontal orientation, rectangular pieces are generally placed vertically to match the dimensions of the volume and thus maximize the size of the image.

All plate entries are by Darielle Mason except for plate 83, which is by Katherine Hacker. Within each collection, the order of plates follows no single logic (e.g., chronological sequence) but was arranged by the curator to emphasize and explore a wide variety of relationships—including iconographic, technical, stylistic, chronological, and visual. There could be (and, during the preparation for this volume, were) any number of orderings, each new juxtaposition making evident a host of exciting relationships. Sadly, books are sequential.





The Edinburgh Geographical Institute

Map 1. Undivided Bengal, 1931. Reproduced from *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 26, *Atlas*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931), plate 30











DARIELLE MASON

## Background Texture: Lives and Landscapes of Bengal's Embroidered Quilts

Recycled rags, household cloths, ritual actions, women's personal expressions, intergenerational bonds, icons of cultural and national identity, links with the ancient past, representations of cosmic reintegration, works of art. To their makers, users, and collectors, the embroidered quilts of Bengal have many identities. These identities shift and merge yet do not conflict, for this rich textile tradition encompasses the practical, the personal, and the symbolic by equal measures.

Over the centuries, women in many parts of the world have combined thrift with meaning through the act of reconstituting functional textiles from tatters. Sometimes, as in the European American and African American traditions of patchwork quilting, meaning comes as much from the diversity of the fabrics—each distinctive fragment evoking a memory—as from the patterns and imagery they create together. At other times, as in the Bengali tradition, comfort and family are invoked by the very fact that the base cloth has been worn and softened against the bodies of close kin. Yet it is the motifs, embroidered in colored thread on the gently puckered white ground, that convey the explicit stories and symbolism embedded in each piece.

At the most fundamental level, kanthas are household textiles. Embroidered kanthas, such as those in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections, were often created as gifts for family members to mark life-cycle occasions. While they appear in a fairly limited range of sizes and shapes, each of these quilts filled an array of functions. Large rectangular pieces (the majority of the Bonovitz Collection) might have been made as bed and floor cloths to seat honored guests, blankets and wraps to keep warm, or even as shrouds and palanquin seating. Smaller rectangles may have been made for newborn babies or as prayer mats, while tiny elongated pieces were often created to enfold mirrors, combs, and other personal items that also had ritual uses, laid on the floor for noteworthy meals, or stitched to





Fig. 1.1. Groom seated on a kantha, Mathbari village, Sundarbans, Khulna Division, Bangladesh, 2007. Photograph by Shehab Uddin / Majority World

envelop Qurans or special implements. Square kanthas (the majority of the Kramrisch Collection) often were made for worshipers to sit on during special meals or *pujas* (Hindu prayers; fig. 1.1), to cover books or other items presented during wedding rituals, to wrap or store cloths, or to drape tables and trunks. Elaborately embroidered or especially beloved pieces would be carefully preserved and passed down through generations, but most kanthas filled a succession of household needs, becoming ever more stained, faded, and fragile until living a final incarnation as diaper or dishcloth.

While *kantha*<sup>1</sup> is perhaps the most generic term used for the type of textile represented by these two collections, the word is applied to a broader category of quilted works encompassing everything from simple rag quilts with widely spaced running stitches, to heavy productions on new red cloth, to the commercially produced furnishings and clothing popular today, often stitched with silk thread on silk fabric. The term *nakshi* (figured) *kantha*<sup>2</sup> is preferred in Bangladesh for embroidered pieces; *sujni* (needlework) is sometimes used generically to refer to kanthas, although it also designates a few distinctive types of quilts.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest preserved examples of kanthas like those represented in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections seem to date to the first half of the nineteenth

century, while the majority were most likely produced between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. In general, they are constructed from multiple layers of cloth sewn together using a distinctive running stitch, often termed a “kantha stitch,” although this was only one among these embroiderers’ repertoire of stitches. The traditional base cloth for kanthas was the thin white cotton fabric, handspun and handwoven, favored in Bengal for both men’s and women’s garments well into the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Over this white ground, women embroidered auspicious motifs and patterns using colored threads, traditionally pulled from the ornamental borders of their used white cotton saris. Indeed, embroidered replications of these woven borders are some of the most common motifs found on kanthas. While the vast majority of kantha-makers used only cotton threads, one piece in the Kramrisch Collection dating from the late nineteenth century (see plate 23) mixes silk with the cotton, showing that women were not against using this luxury material when it was available. In terms of color, red and blue thread predominated, the latter traditionally dyed with indigo, one of the major agricultural products of the region. The use of black plus various greens and yellow-orange threads for motifs was also common, while hot pink and purple appear occasionally.

The white ground around and between motifs was often quilted with parallel running stitches in white thread to secure the layers and create background texture. As the works in these collections demonstrate, the repertoire of stitches and techniques, together with the fact that the embroiderers did not employ frames or hoops to keep the cloth taut, gives kanthas—whether fully quilted or not—a wonderful variety of textures, from intermittent swells to ripples to densely regimented ridges.

### Landscape and History

The gently textured landscapes of kanthas are not unlike the landscape of Bengal itself, which is crisscrossed by innumerable rivers and embankments. Historically, the region has centered around the lush and frequently flooded deltaic lowlands where the Brahmaputra-Jamuna and Ganges-Padma river sys-





tems empty into the Bay of Bengal. Wet rice cultivation has long been the primary agricultural activity and rural villages the habitation of most of the population (figs. 1.2, 1.3). The extensive river system for inland transport, along with the natural ports around the Bay of Bengal, linked the region to other parts of the subcontinent, especially the southeastern or Coramandel coast. They also made Bengal an early and prime player in Indian Ocean trade, with networks reaching across Southeast Asia, into East Asia, and beyond.

Sea powers throughout the world coveted Bengal not only for her strategic ports and as an entrepôt, but also as a producer of raw materials and hand-manufactured goods. The region was especially known for its plain and embroidered muslins and other fine cotton cloth, including sheer-patterned *jamdani* weavings.<sup>5</sup> As early as the sixteenth century, the Portuguese and Dutch joined the Arabs and Armenians in setting up trading posts in the delta.

As with so many domestic craft traditions, the origins of embroidered kanthas are undocumented, but some scholars have speculated that the practice was spurred by the embroidered and quilted textiles produced for the Portuguese market. These so-called Satgaon embroideries (named for the primary Portuguese port on the Hooghly River, at modern-day Kolkata) may be dated at least as far back as the



sixteenth century, not long after the Portuguese arrived, although most surviving examples date to the seventeenth century. Most of these early export embroideries differ substantially in both material and technique from the kanthas in these collections, but several early works use the running stitch, blue and red thread, and motifs very similar to kanthas, implying that kanthas (or their forebears) may well have been produced for personal, domestic use for many centuries before the earliest surviving examples, and that the domestic textiles may even have sparked the export wares.<sup>6</sup>

Following their European rivals, the British East India Company soon joined the Bengal fray and established Calcutta as its trading post. The Company's rise was swift if dirty, and in 1757 it gained economic and political power over the region. Soon after, it established the Bengal Presidency, a huge territory that stretched west into Hindi-speaking central India and south through the Oriya-language region, thus encompassing far more than later Undivided Bengal. Within twenty-five years, the British East India Company had firmly established control across this territory, and Calcutta was booming. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the city was Europe's largest foothold in Asia.

In the early nineteenth century the availability of European and American machine-produced cloth

Fig. 1.2. Rice and banana cultivation near Paharpur, Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, 2006. Photograph by the author

Fig. 1.3. Samuel Bourne (British, 1834–1912), *View of a Bengal Village*, 1863. Albumen print on cardboard mount, 8 x 13 inches (20.3 x 33 cm). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



decreased the export market for all but the finest of Bengal's muslins. However, the British East India Company's increased production of cash crops—especially jute, indigo, and opium—compensated for the drop in textile exports. Over the course of the century, the Company improved internal transportation to convey these cash crops to the ports, as well as to supply raw materials to the various manufacturing industries developing around Calcutta and other parts of western Bengal. Road systems were followed by riverine steam traffic, and, in 1854, the first rail line in the subcontinent was constructed between Calcutta and the port of Hooghly.

In 1858 the British crown took direct control of India, drawing it into the empire. The economic gulf between eastern and western Bengal continued to widen over the following decades, however, exacerbating religious and labor unrest. In 1905 the British attempted to diffuse these tensions by partitioning Bengal along religious (as well as, to a great extent, economic) lines—Hindu in the west and Muslim in the east. Although it left a significant imprint, this first partition of Bengal was short-lived and collapsed soon after the capital of British India was relocated from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. The reunified Bengal, however, was significantly smaller than the original Bengal Presidency, its new borders now demarcating a population that shared a common language—Bangla (Bengali).<sup>7</sup>

When India gained independence from Britain in 1947, Bengal once again was torn apart, its western half remaining part of Hindu-majority India, while its eastern portion became part of the new Muslim-majority state of Pakistan. However, the heavily negotiated line of this now-national border did not follow that of the 1905 partition. In particular, its southern portion lay significantly farther west, placing the rural (and Hindu-majority) Khulna District (now Khulna and Barisal divisions), as well as most of Jessore, in Bangladesh, while its central portion lay further east, giving India the industrial (and Muslim-majority) city of Murshidabad as well as the bulk of the rail system.<sup>8</sup>

The new nation of Pakistan was itself bifurcated. East Bengal (soon after renamed East Pakistan) had no adjacent territory with the larger western part of

the country. West Pakistan contained the national capital, the prosperous Punjab, and a primarily Shiite Muslim population with strong ties to the Middle East. It consequently held the lion's share of political, economic, and cultural-religious power. East Pakistan, however, held the majority of the population. Not long after independence and partition, a call arose for Bangla to be placed on a par with Urdu, the language of West Pakistan. This language dispute began a decades-long cultural-economic battle that culminated in the 1971 invasion of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, a conflict now known as the Bangladesh Liberation War. The result was the establishment of the independent nation of Bangladesh.

Today Bengal is subdivided by the national border separating Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal (compare the maps on pp. xii and xiii). Despite two partitions and often antagonistic religious identities, however, the inhabitants of Bengal continue to share a common language and deep cultural roots, including a heritage of kantha-making, which seems to have been a practice common in some form across the entire region. While, as discussed below, determining the provenance of specific kantas in these collections presents steep challenges, Stella Kramrisch published many of her quilts as from the south-central portions of Bengal (the Khulna, Jessore, and Faridpur districts of post-1911 Undivided Bengal), regions now mostly within the borders of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's national capital of Dhaka (renamed from Dacca in 1983) and the West Bengal state capital of Kolkata (renamed from Calcutta in 2001) are today among the largest urban centers on the planet, and Bengal is the most densely inhabited part of South Asia. Nevertheless, much of the population on both sides of the border continues to live in rural villages where, despite myriad changes from a century past, many of the motifs on kantas may still be seen. Ponds full of lotus and wild hydrangea, fields of banana plants, and a variety of palm trees dot the landscape (see plates 69, 75); wild flowers and birds abound in extraordinary diversity, while cattle and, to a lesser extent, horses remain essential to everyday life (see figs. 1.2–1.4). Yet dangers balance the region's fertile beauty. During the period when



women created the textiles in these collections, many tigers still hunted in the forests and swamps, and devastating famines punctuated each lifetime. Today, despite the monumental efforts of both governments, the floods that annually inundate much of the delta region still destroy crops and villages and spread disease. Even snakebites still threaten, as, of course, do poor harvests, hunger, infertility, childhood illnesses, and discord within the joint family.

Appreciating the everyday challenges faced by rural Bengali women is another key to “reading” *kanthas* and provides clues to their underlying organization and meaning. While personal and family circumstances affected and differentiated women’s lives in many ways, the commonalities of Bengali culture also united them through shared beliefs, rituals, and routines. Women and men generally lived in a joint-family system, in which several dozen people might share a single roof. Women’s sphere was—and, to varying extents, remains—formally separate from that of men, although always intertwined and interdependent. The cultural justification for and institutional details of this separation differed not only between Hindu and Muslim families, but also by socioeconomic status, urban or rural residence, caste, and region.

This formal separation of spheres affected women’s behavior both inside and outside the home—determining, for example, which family members they could communicate with directly, when they needed to cover their heads and/or faces, and appropriate levels of interaction with people outside the family. For wealthier families, it may have required keeping enclosed conveyances for women. When economics allowed, it dictated the physical layout of the house, with the *antahpur* (women’s quarters, usually consisting of a kitchen and courtyard with adjacent rooms) at the center, surrounded by male quarters.<sup>9</sup> Strict hierarchical arrangements among women kept the joint family functioning, even as it exacerbated the power struggles so vividly depicted in popular literature<sup>10</sup> and, later, in film.

Marriage, like childbearing, was not a choice but a family duty, and its celebration constituted the major event not only of a woman’s life, but of the lives of two families. The new bride brought prosperity into her in-



laws’ household, in the immediate form of dowry and labor, but more importantly in the potential of children, especially sons, who would remain for life in their natal home, enriching the family and eventually bringing in their own brides. The elaborate multiday wedding ceremony, as well as many of the various rituals undertaken by unmarried girls and mothers, including *bratas* (*vratas*, vows) and their related *alpanas* (ritual painting; see below), were aimed at encouraging fertility, just as agricultural rituals and celebrations promoted beneficent weather and a healthy harvest to feed the family. Women’s rituals, however, also encouraged the familial harmony so crucial to a new wife’s health and happiness.

Women in rural areas not only managed the home and children, but also played a major role in farming. In wet rice production, for example, they participated in the laborious activities of seeding, transplanting, and harvesting, and also had sole responsibility for post-harvest production. The tools used to process the harvest, such as the *dheki* (foot-operated rice thresher) and *kula* (winnowing tray), were seen as auspicious symbols promoting prosperity and fertility (figs. 1.5–1.7). Thus, many of these items played key roles in life-cycle events, especially those surrounding marriage and children, as well as rituals celebrating the harvest.<sup>11</sup>

Fig. 1.4. A local tree shrine with clay votive horses and elephants, near Bishnupur, Bankura District, West Bengal, India, 1998. Photograph by the author





Fig. 1 5. Detail of plate 39 showing a *dhecki* and a *kula*

Fig. 1 6. Women processing rice, including pounding with a *dhecki*. A *kula* and bird perch are also visible in the composition. Watercolor on paper for the local British market, Patna, Bihar, c. 1840. Photograph © The British Library (Add Or.3965)

Fig. 1 7. Bride being presented with ritual objects on a *kula*, Mathbari village, Sundarbans, Khulna Division, Bangladesh, 2007. Photograph by Shehab Uddin / Majority World

### Composition and Motifs

As the plates in this volume make clear, the vast majority of *kanthas*, whether square or rectangular, large or small, figural or geometric, share certain basic elements of composition. Primary among these is the prominent central roundel, around which other embroidered motifs are oriented. The roundel itself runs the gamut from a naturalistically rendered open lotus (figs. 1.8, 1.9), to an abstract blossom or star, to concentric patterned rings, to a circle of interlocking hexagons. The lotus is one of the most ancient, potent, and common images in Indic art, its symbolism perhaps best articulated by Kramrisch.<sup>12</sup> Supported on a single stem that rises straight from mud through the water, it opens in the sun. Its unsullied symmetrical petals surround a perfectly circular



seedpod. The lotus is thus an ideal representation not only of purity, but also of the axis of the cosmos itself. It is the support, the connection, and the center from which all creation radiates.

When introducing *kanthas* to students of Indic art in the 1930s, both Kramrisch and the Bengali scholar Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941) recognized that the more immediate roots of the embroidered lotus center motif, and indeed of the quilts' overall decorative program, could be found in *alpana*, an ephemeral ritual art traditionally practiced by Bengali women.<sup>13</sup> *Alpanas* usually consist of designs finger-painted on the ground or floor using a paste of pulverized rice and water, at times augmented by earth pigments. The most basic *alpana* motif is a single lotus flower (see figs. 5.16–5.18), which may be stylized in all the forms found on *kanthas*.

Women created *alpanas* for the frequent *pujas* and related festivals that marked the agricultural year, at times drawing the same composition each day or adding elements to it daily for the entire lunar month of the celebration. Most life-cycle events, especially marriage rituals and celebrations surrounding birth and early childhood, such as the first consumption of rice, entailed their own particular *alpanas*.





Fig. 1.8. Detail of the central lotus, plate 1

Fig. 1.9. Girl with lotus flowers collected from a pond, village near Pabna, Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, 2007. Photograph by Shehab Uddin / Majority World

The most popular *alpanas* appear to have been those made for Lakshmi *pujas*, performed to honor the goddess of prosperity—and the archetype of a good and successful wife. Recorded Lakshmi *alpanas* take many forms, often including a range of desired ornaments and utensils, a sari and pots of *sindur* to emphasize the crucial married state, and the god-

desses' rice-paste footprints (fig. 1.10). In an early-twentieth-century *alpana*-like painting of Lakshmi and her husband Vishnu, agricultural implements can also be seen, including a *dheki* and a *kula*, and footprints lead to a raised granary marked with a propitious red emblem (fig. 1.11). It is clearly the auspicious and apotropaic connotations of these objects,

Fig. 1.10. Design of an *alpana* for Lakshmi Puja. Reproduced from Abanindranath Tagore, *L'Alpana ou les décorations rituelles au Bengale* (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1921), p. 23



Fig. 1.11. *Lakshmi-Narayana*, watercolor on board, South Twenty-four Parganas, West Bengal, India, c. 1950. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 42/70). Photograph by the author



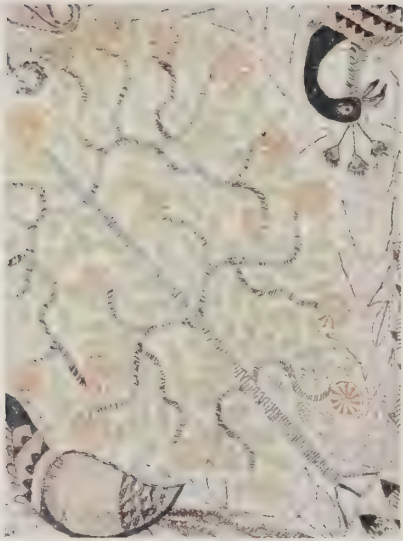


Fig. 1.12. Detail of a corner *kadamba* tree, plate 1



Fig. 1.13. Canopy of a *kadamba* tree, Bangladesh, 2008. Photograph by Bayazid Akter / Majority World



Fig. 1.14. Flowers of a *kadamba* tree, Bangladesh, 2007. Photograph by M Yousuf Tushar / Majority World

more than their mere presence in the home, that made them standard motifs in *alpanas* and that led women to incorporate them into their *kanthas*. Equally common, although of a somewhat different nature, were *alpanas* made as part of *bratas*, the vows performed by Bengali women for personal and familial benefit. While the art of *alpana* is enjoying a revival, the newer designs are more simplified and its function is more decorative than ritual.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note, however, that just as the lotus and other motifs are found across the subcontinent, so ritual floor and wall painting were and are practiced by women in many parts of South Asia. Likewise, agricultural and life-cycle rituals and personal vows permeate and regulate the lives of women in all regions. Only the specifics of these rituals differentiate those of Bengal, just as the nuances of mediums, design, and meaning distinguish *alpanas* and figural *kanthas* from women's painting and textile traditions in other regions.

Another basic element of composition seen in most of these *kanthas* is the motif placed at each of the four corners of the cloth. The essential identity of this motif, and its most common form, is the flowering tree, called by Kramrisch and others the "tree of life." These may closely resemble real trees, often species that hold special significance, such as Krishna's sacred *kadamba* (figs. 1.12–1.14). Conversely, they may surpass Dr. Seuss's imaginary flora in their

whimsical stylization. The paisley forms called *kalkas* often stand in for these corner trees. Indeed, the *kalka* (or *botah*) is itself derived from a cypress tree and was adopted in Bengal as an already stylized motif by way of other textile traditions. Like the lotus, the flowering or fruit-bearing tree is an ancient Indic fertility symbol. In Bengal, as in other parts of the subcontinent, certain species are still regularly propitiated by women who wish to conceive, as well as for other reasons (see fig. 1.4).

The placement of these treelike motifs at the corners of the cloth is equally significant. In the Indic world, sacred space—and the cosmos it connotes—is defined as a square with demarcated corners and a central axis.<sup>15</sup> Across the subcontinent, the square sanctum of the Hindu temple, where the deity "blossoms" into manifestation, is topped by an axial tower and its ritual corners are architecturally accented, often including sculpted protectors. The temporarily sanctified space created for wedding rituals is likewise a square with corner posts.<sup>16</sup> In Bengal it may also take the form of four banana "trees." (Contemporary Bengali Hindu weddings, as well as Muslim ceremonies in some regions, retain the idea of this banana-tree square, although its precise ritual use varies.) In addition, in traditional Bengali weddings the bride and groom are carried to and participate in the ceremony on *pidis*—square or rectangular wooden boards painted with wedding *alpanas*—that





Fig. 1.15. *Shiva's Marriage*, watercolor on board. Birbhum District, Undivided Bengal, early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 1994). Photograph by the author.



Fig. 1.16. Bride covering her face with a betel leaf as she is carried on a *pidi* around the groom, who stands on a second *pidi*, Kolkata, November 2008. Photograph by Kiran Hacker.

in their basic format closely resemble kanthas, especially the square types sometimes created as ritual seats (figs. 1.15, 1.16).

The corner tree motifs on kanthas also act in conjunction with the central lotus to subdivide the quilt field into quadrants, each of which often contains a discrete group of images. This cardinally radiating organization again evokes the temple, with its cardinal openings or image-niches, as well as the symmetric Muslim tomb or shrine, with its central dome, corner towers, and four cardinal *iwans* (vaulted openings). These architectural parallels remind us

that kanthas were created to be “read”—and in a sense to function—as sacred spaces.

Fish have an ancient Indic association with the goddess, and with women in general. In forms ranging from abstractly generic to engrossingly specific, they are one of the most common motifs in figural kanthas and ubiquitous in all the arts made by and for Bengali women (fig. 1.17, 1.18). The freshwater varieties in particular are a favored protein source in Bengal, and the region's cuisine is noted for its fish dishes (along with its fabulous sweets). In the past, as today, fish were not only favored, but also expensive.

Fig. 1.17. Fish-shaped *son-desh*, a common sweet traditionally made by women and served at weddings and other special functions, here in a sweet shop in Old Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2006. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 1.18. Fish-shaped containers and other *dokra* (resin-thread recycled metal) objects were commissioned by women for domestic and ritual uses. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection 1994-148-222, 223.





Singly or in pairs, fish are presented at various junctures in marriage ceremonies as well as the feasts that accompany weddings and other occasions, and a fish head is one of the delicacies traditionally prepared for an expectant mother. Not surprisingly, fish appear frequently in recorded *alpanas* for weddings and Lakshmi *pujas*, among others.

An even more frequent motif in kanthas are birds of all types, second only to plant forms on the Kramrisch and Bonovitz quilts. Captive birds were common accoutrements in prosperous households (see fig. 1.6; plate 5). Certain birds (e.g., Lakshmi's owl) had particular religious associations, while birds in general, and pairs of birds in particular, had romantic or erotic connotations. In kanthas, however, peacocks are by far the most prominent, often shown in pairs or placed around the central lotus, almost always with a serpent dangling from their beaks. The peacock had been a favored motif in Mughal art of all types, appearing with and without the serpent. Peacocks were and are commonly found on fine woven fabrics, including the elegant Baluchar silk saris made in Murshidabad (see fig. 1.28). This bird also appears, both with and without the snake, in a variety of other types of nineteenth-century Bengali art. Across the subcontinent, as in Bengal, the peafowl alone and in conjunction with the snake bears a rich medley of meanings, any or all of which may have ignited and perpetuated the motif's popularity in kanthas. The peacock connotes the fecundity of the monsoon season (when it mates, loudly), and its iridescent turquoise body reflects the beloved blue-skinned god Krishna. It is the vehicle of Shiva's son Karttikeya, and the serpent in its beak echoes the snake-killing prowess of Garuda, Vishnu's mount and protector.<sup>17</sup> In the Muslim context, the peacock has perhaps even greater import. Peacocks guard the entry to paradise, and, in South Asia, the prophet Muhammad's heavenly steed, the *buraq*, often sports a peacock tail. In mystical Sufism, so significant to Bengali Islam, peacock pairs signify the duality of Muhammad and God.

Particular culinary and personal items that convey fertility and fortune, all used in marriage rituals or preparations, are found clustered in abbreviated form in the pictogramlike vocabulary of recorded

*brata alpana*. They likewise appear in many kanthas, sometimes in more easily recognizable form. As Pika Ghosh discusses (see "Embroidering Bengal," this volume), these include the various ingredients and tools for the digestive *pan*, especially the *janti* (cutter), the stimulant areca nut, and the heart-shaped betel-leaf wrapper, which together and individually play significant and varied roles in multiple rituals in all Bengali weddings, Hindu and Muslim. Likewise, the ornaments associated with marriage and the auspicious married state, from the requisite bangles to combs, earrings, forehead pendants, and necklaces, show up in kanthas, as in *brata alpanas*. Common kitchen utensils, including spoons, spatulas, and *chimte* (metal tongs used to remove a pot from the fire), show, at their most fundamental, the desire for a continuing abundance of food and for a wife's ability to prepare it.

As it is today, the system of marriage for both Hindus and Muslims was patrilineal and patrilocal (as well as decidedly patriarchal) for all levels of society, with the girl going to live with her husband's family at the time of marriage. Traditionally, rural marriages were arranged between families in different villages (village exogamy) and limited by a variety of customs so as to spread the ties among many villages. In this way each family and each village became enmeshed in a complex social and economic network with hundreds of others in the surrounding area. Even though marriages were generally contracted within easy traveling distance—five to ten miles before the availability of motorized vehicles—over a few generations this practice could spread family traditions across an extensive area. Traditionally the bride and groom traveled between their villages in *palkis* (palanquins) and with great fanfare. These ritual conveyances are a common *alpana* image, and *palki* processions are depicted in kanthas (figs. 1.19, 1.20). Although the practice is rare today, the significance of the *palki*, like that of the *kula*, is retained in the miniature versions used at weddings, even in urban areas.

Through most of the nineteenth century, especially in elite Hindu families, the custom was for girls to marry at or before age ten, to coincide with the first menses. (Infant marriage was also common, but the





girl remained with her birth family until the appropriate age.) Toward the end of the century, legislation and changing social norms increased this age gradually, especially in urban areas, but teen marriage was the norm well into the twentieth century, and still is in rural areas today. Because girls learned to paint *alpanas* and embroider kanthas from older women in the household, early marriage meant that they would begin learning from their mother or grandmother in their natal home, but receive much of their tutelage in their husband's home under their mother-in-law or grandmother-in-law, for example, whose practices may have been quite different.

### Religion and Identity

For most people in South Asia, “religion” is not a category separable from everyday life. Whether Hindu or Muslim, the women who made kanthas performed multiple “religious” activities each day, and incorporated aspects of these into the vocabulary of kanthas (figs. 1.21, 1.22; see also fig. 2.13). A typical day likely included personal prayer and daily women's rituals at home, vows and family rituals, and the extensive and extended rituals surrounding life-cycle events. Women often participated in festivals and heard (or, if literate, read) sacred stories, holy books, and popular religious manuals. Local mullahs were an important conduit of Islam to women, while visits to neighborhood temples

or outdoor shrines (such as tree shrines; see fig. 1.4) formed part of many Hindu women's week. Rarer were pilgrimages to holy sites—*tirthas* (particularly sacred spots) or temples serving special needs for Hindus; the tomb shrines of *pirs* (Sufi saints) and, perhaps, a visit to Mecca for Muslims.

While Bengali religious practices share much with those across South Asia, certain regional characteristics distinguish both Hinduism and Islam and are worth noting. Direct devotional Hinduism (*bhakti*), especially the focus on Krishna, is prevalent and distinctive in the region. While this form of devotion began there as early as the thirteenth century, it blossomed with Chaitanya (1486–1533), a charismatic leader considered an incarnation of Krishna and his beloved Radha combined. The devotional theology and ecstatic practices developed by Chaitanya and his followers—known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism—infuse not only Bengali Hinduism but also the interwoven fabric of Bengali culture to the present. As Ghosh discusses in “Embroidering Bengal,” this theology is expressed in a number of kanthas (see plate 1), as is devotional dancing and singing (see plate 37), as well as more spectacular forms of Krishna worship like the impressive annual Rathayatra (processional festival of Krishna as Jagannatha) held to the south in Puri, Orissa, and repeated on lesser scales across Bengal (see plates 53, 62).

Bengali Hinduism includes an equally potent and often intertwined focus on many forms of the

Fig. 1.19. Detail of plate 61 showing a wedding procession with bride and groom in a *palki* followed by musicians

Fig. 1.20. A bride in a *palki* followed by musicians, Chalna village, Khulna Division, Bangladesh, 2005. Photograph by Masud Rana / Majority World





Fig. 1.21. An enthroned *shaligrama* (ammonite embodiment of Vishnu) with female attendant and baby Krishna, Undivided Bengal, c. 1890–1900. Oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches (79.5 x 60.5 cm). British Museum, London, 1990.1031.3. In front is a row of *puja* utensils arranged as on an altar. On the right is a *kosha* with spoonlike *kushi* inside next to a *shankha* (conch shell) trumpet. Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 1.22. Detail of plate 57 depicting from above the flowers and leaves floating in a *kosha* (ritual water vessel)

Fig. 1.23. Painted clay image prepared for Durga Puja showing the goddess Durga and her lion destroying the demon Mahisha and flanked by the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati and the gods Ganesha and Kartikeya, Dhakuria, South Calcutta, October 2008. Photograph by Katherine Hacker

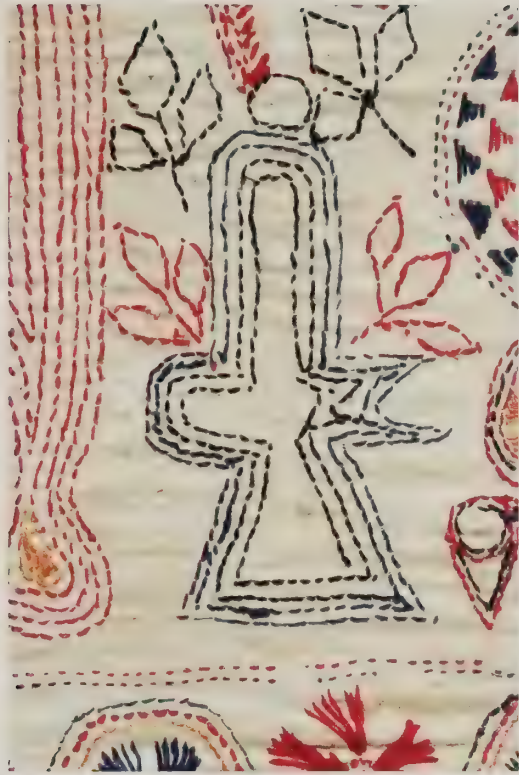
goddess (Durga, Shakti, etc.). The Bengali Hindu calendar is highlighted by the various public goddess *pujas* (Durga Puja is most prominent today [fig. 1.23], followed by the *pujas* for Saraswati and Kali) in which elaborate temporary images are created, honored, and then immersed in water. As Ghosh discusses, these “pan-Indic” goddesses (who nevertheless have a decided Bengali character) are joined by a host of local goddesses, such as the serpent deity Manasa, whose narratives and devotional practices express the region’s distinctive identity.



As throughout Hinduism, Durga, Kali, and many of these local goddesses are intimately connected with another focal deity, the god Shiva. Shiva’s abstract form, the pillarlike *linga* containing the god’s potential and potency, is honored at the center of most temples dedicated to him, and its distinctive shape may be found in various contexts on a number of kanthas (figs. 1.24, 1.25).

While Hindus usually designate themselves Vaishnava, Shakta, or Shaiva, these systems are by no means mutually exclusive in terms of worship and iconography, and perhaps they intersect more in Bengal than in any other part of the subcontinent. There is a wonderful fluidity of identity in kantha imagery that is readily evident in the context of complex iconic and narrative images. In a kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 3), for example, the bow-wielding hero Rama, one of the avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, charges his battle chariot against the many-headed demon Ravana (figs. 1.26, 1.27). Flanking Rama inside his chariot are large *lingas* (with smaller ones ensconced in the spaces below them), as appear in processional chariots in a number of other kanthas (see, e.g., plates 33, 40).<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, while the position of the figures and numerous other details strongly suggest that the embroiderer adapted the composition from a popular devotional print made in the Battala area of Calcutta, no *lingas* appear in the source.





What did the embroider intend? Is she illustrating the episode of Rama and his monkey cohorts battling Ravana? Is she recording, by way of the print, one of the many theatrical reenactments of the battle performed by costumed actors, masked dancers, and puppeteers at festivals that also involved such processions? Or is she “merely” replicating a printed illustration, perhaps picked up as a souvenir by a family member visiting Calcutta, but “reading” the battle chariot as the more familiar processional car and its arches as *linga* forms? Is there any clear separation between these contexts? Or are the gods equally present in all of them, and the images themselves imbued with multiple meanings? Indeed, the Bengali version of the *Ramayana* common in the nineteenth century and today forefronts not Rama/Vishnu, but the goddess Durga, who swoops in to help Rama land the final blow. While Bengalis are joyously celebrating Durga Puja to mark the victory of the goddess over Mahisha, the buffalo demon, much of the rest of India is celebrating Dusshera to honor Rama’s victory over Ravana. Yet there is no conflict between these variations on the triumph over evil, and assert-



ing a single sectarian “correctness” faces stiff challenges. As with the lotus, peacock, or betel leaf, attempts to pin a single and invariable “meaning” onto motifs in kanthas are countered by the rich layering that constitutes one glory of this art form, and of Bengal, itself.

The situation becomes even more complex—and contested—when discussing the nature of Islamic “imagery” and Muslim embroiderers. Islam has had a presence in Bengal since at least the early thirteenth century, when the region came under the control of the Turkic rulers of Delhi, and it later became the easternmost province of the Mughal Empire. Bengal’s Muslim population was and is overwhelmingly Sunni, but mystical Sufi beliefs and practices are deeply integrated into popular religious practice. What makes Bengali Islam even more distinctive is its admixture of Bengali Hindu rituals, concepts, and local beliefs. By the time of the British census of 1872, the first such counting, a substantial number of Bengalis identified themselves as Muslim. Indeed, Muslims accounted for roughly half the population in the areas where the most elaborate figural kanthas seem to have been produced.<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 1.24. Detail of plate 14 showing a *linga* topped by a triple bell leaf and fruit offerings

Fig. 1.25. Woman illustrating a large *linga*; on top are offerings of leaves and fruit, Puthia, Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, 2006. Photograph by the author





Fig. 1.26. Detail of plate 3 showing a battle between Ravana and Rama



Fig. 1.27. *Battle of Lanka*. Metal-cut print, probably Battala, North Calcutta, nineteenth century. Page in an album bound by W. E. Thorpe and Co., Folkstone (1860s–1890s); 11 x 18 1/4 inches (27.9 x 46.4 cm). Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, E302187.65

The partition of 1947 was accompanied by an enormous displacement of people and destruction of property, and it dramatically altered domestic life on both sides of the border, changing, if not destroying, many local craft traditions.<sup>20</sup> Along with the availability of cheaper materials and more “modern” techniques such as cross-stitch, this dislocation of women seems to have been the major factor in the decline of embroidered kanthas, particularly those with elaborate narrative imagery. Thus it is tempting to infer that the Hindu women of Khulna, Jessore, and Faridpur were the primary producers of figural kanthas, and that their dislocation and, frequently, refugee status interrupted production. Yet pre-partition kanthas themselves, including those in this catalogue, may paint a more complex picture.

Perhaps the most common type of historical embroidered kantha extant today is not what is highlighted in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections, but those ornamented solely with embroidered replications of woven sari border patterns (*par*). The most elaborate, called *par tola*, have surfaces covered with concentric borders in an array of patterns (see figs. 2.16, 2.22, 2.23). The extensive kantha collection in the Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka, created primarily after 1965, is particularly rich in such *par tola* kanthas.<sup>21</sup> Are these nonfigural kanthas the majority of what was produced, or were they favored in the collecting process because they seemed more appropriately Islamic? Or were most figural kanthas destroyed or carried across the border by their Hindu embroiderers?

Much of the literature on kanthas, even that written during the 1930s, either states or implies that Muslim women rejected all human and most animal imagery in favor of “ornamental” designs such as *par* patterns, vegetation, and everyday objects, plus such obviously Islamic motifs as the mosque or star and crescent. Kramrisch herself wrote, “A Muslim *kantha*, faithful to the precepts of a non-iconic art, shows nothing but scrollwork.”<sup>22</sup> This understanding is based on the much-repeated “dictate” that Islam forbids image-making because it usurps God’s creative prerogative. Scholarship from both Bangladesh and India over the past thirty years has further bifurcated kanthas into Hindu-figural and Muslim-nonfigural categories. It is difficult to determine the degree to which this reflects



the sentiment against image-making that seems to have been especially prevalent in East Pakistan in the period leading up to independence, and which appears again to be strengthening today. Undoubtedly, a general sentiment exists on both sides of the border that images and image-making are vaguely, if not vehemently, anti-Islamic.

However, apart from the sacred contexts of mosques and tombs, where images must never appear, animal and even human figures, while certainly not worshiped, are by no means anathema to most Muslims in Bangladesh. This is clear in many contexts, including annual Eid festivals, where painted clay figurines of animals, beneficent mothers, and happy couples are sold in droves. However, as Henry Glassie documented in his 1997 study *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, while the consumers of such images today are often Muslims, the makers are generally Hindus. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the other hand, Muslim artists certainly produced human images, as was the norm for artists in the wider Indo-Islamic context. For example, Muslim weavers in Murshidabad incorporated elaborate figural motifs onto their Baluchar saris (fig. 1.28), while Muslim painters recorded everyday life for British patrons. Did Bengali women follow stricter prohibitions in their kanthas?

Due to the shared predilection of Kramrisch and the Bonovitzes for figural imagery, it may well seem that both collections—and this volume—privilege “Hindu” over “Muslim” material and makers. In Kramrisch’s case, her fascination with Hindu narrative imagery certainly influenced her collecting agenda. However, as our work on these collections progressed, the complexity of these issues, and of determining a maker’s religious affiliation, has become even more apparent. Of the eighty-five pieces comprising both collections, fewer than thirty-five may be said with absolute certainty to contain explicitly Hindu inscriptions and/or imagery (more than twenty of these are in the Kramrisch Collection). Yet, in one case, some of the richest “Hindu” narrative imagery, including the *Ramayana* battle (see fig. 1.26; see also plate 3, figs. 4.28, 4.29), shares the surface with a roundel bearing the Arabic inscription *Ya Allah*, the Muslim invocation of God’s name (fig. 1.29; see also fig. 4.22).



Fig. 1.28. Detail of the *mayur-pankhi* motifs on a nineteenth-century sari from Baluchar, Murshidabad, Undivided Bengal. Silk plain weave with silk brocading wefts. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1961-176-4



Fig. 1.29. Detail of plate 3 showing the roundel bearing the inscription *Ya Allah*



Fig. 1.30. Detail of plate 3 showing the underdrawing of a *gopi* in the *vastraharana* episode

Bengal's Muslims and Hindus share not only many art forms, customs, and ritual actions (along with the related objects and imagery), but also certain local devotional practices. In her essay in this volume, Katherine Hacker has explored one of the most fascinating examples: Dakshin Ray ("southern king"), the tiger deity propitiated by Muslim and Hindu alike, especially in the Sundarbans, the dense—and formerly tiger-infested—mangrove forest that covers much of the Ganges delta. Regional cults also formed around specific *pirs* (Muslim spiritual masters), such as that of Satya Pir—whose devotion shows a close relationship with the local worship of Satya Narayana, a form of Vishnu, both of whom ride tiger mounts. As Hacker also notes, the great tigers that appear, alone or mounted by male riders with distinctive accoutrements, on kanthas with no definitively Hindu imagery (and some that may be explicitly Muslim; see plates 5, 83) constitute intriguing items for exploration.

### Modernity and Revival

Attempting to segregate the "religious" from the "secular" on kanthas is as futile as other attempts at hermetic categorization. Bengal had long been known as a locus for literary and artistic culture, and thus possessed a well-educated elite prior to British rule. One of the earliest acts of the East India Company administrators was to consolidate land into the hands of a few *zamindars* (landholders) on the model of the landed British aristocracy, which led to a smaller elite with a greater concentration of wealth, and others with a family tradition of education but no land. In Calcutta, their administrative headquarters, the British required a large English-educated bureaucracy and supported and encouraged the growth of relevant institutions. By the end of the eighteenth century, an English-speaking clerical class had emerged from the region's educated population. The honorific *babu* was later co-opted by the British to designate males from this group; by the mid-nineteenth century, the term could also be used pejoratively to refer to members of the anglophilic elite.

Early in the nineteenth century, the painters around the Kalighat temple near Calcutta began to

produce cheap souvenir icons (see figs. 4.23, 4.30). They soon found that images satirizing the effete, dissipated *babu* with his fashionable *bibi* (courtesan companion), as well as illustrations of sensational urban events and scandals (see figs. 1.31, 4.18), sold as well as, if not better than, those of Hindu deities, and ostensibly brought moral messages to the masses. Inexpensive, quickly produced Kalighat paintings spread across Bengal, along with even cheaper printed alternatives (first woodblocks, followed by metal blocks, lithographs, and oleographs; see figs. 1.27, 4.10) that paralleled or elaborated on the Kalighat imagery and put it within reach of most households. Their spread was aided by the expansion of the rail system in the second half of the century, which created direct access from Calcutta to the Bengali cities of Khulna, Faridpur, and Jessore, among others.

Images from these popular paintings and prints show up in kanthas in a number of contexts. As described above, some embroiderers used them to help organize complex compositions, while others may have directly traced or transferred the images, as is likely on a kantha whose extensive red underdrawing includes Kalighat-like faces (fig. 1.30; see also fig. 4.8). In some cases embroiderers adapted

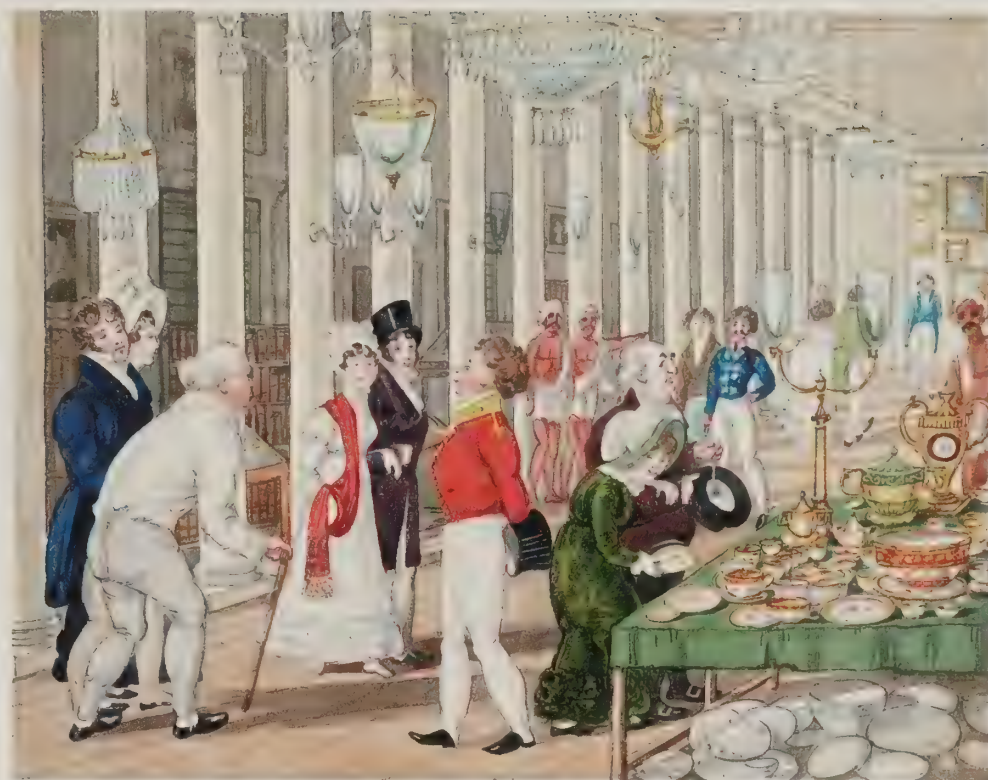






particular motifs, such as the various satirical and moralizing scenes of gender reversal (see figs. 3.7, 4.22; plates 3–5). Their interest was also often caught by the fashions and accoutrements of sophisticated urban life. *Babu* dandies with mustaches and parted or upturned “Prince Albert” hairdos sport curl-toed or buckle shoes as they share hugs and hookahs with their *bibis* (fig. 1.31; see also fig. 4.35), or carouse on peacock-prowed pleasure boats called *mayurpankhis* (see plate 5). Some embroiderers also gloried in depicting expensive modern furnishings, including curving Regency chairs and glass lanterns and sconces that originated as imports for British residents but soon were equally coveted by the local elite, and manufactured locally as well (fig. 1.32; see also plate 84).

Since the steam engine was such a transforming factor for much of the period, the appearance of trains in *kanthas* is not surprising, nor is the attention given to the specifics of the machine (see fig. 2.24). In one depiction, however, the needlewoman has given the engineer a *kula* with which to shovel



coal, showing yet again the fluidity of image-making in the medium (fig. 1.33). Similarly, another embroiderer has accurately depicted a large train and, cater-corner to this, has stitched a *mayurpankhi* with a smokestack and two paddlewheels, along with its traditional paddle-bearing pilot (fig. 1.34; see also plate 84). While small steamboats did navigate the Hooghly (and a popular Kalighat image depicts one with a group of Europeans inside<sup>23</sup>), it is in question whether such craft ever sported the peacock prow.

The traditional organization of cotton cloth production at the local level in Bengal was that women carded and spun the thread at home, then gave it to a male weaver to make into cloth. When machine cotton manufacturing developed in India, especially from the 1870s, it was centered not in Bengal but in western India (Bombay and Gujarat), and its products were largely destined for the domestic market. At first this factory production was more heavily focused on yarn for local handloom weaving than on finished cloth, but by the second decade of the twentieth century finished cloth predominated.<sup>24</sup> The

Fig. 1.31. *A Babu with His Bibi*, Kalighat painting, c. 1890. Watercolor with silver details on paper. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Fig. 1.32. Sir Charles D'Oyly (British, 1781–1845), *Tom Raw visits Taylor & Co.'s emporium in Calcutta*, c. 1828. Watercolor on paper, 7 x 9 inches (18.1 x 23 cm). Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London





Fig. 1.33. Detail of plate 85 showing a train engineer using a *kula*-shaped coal shovel, along with a medley of other vehicles

Fig. 1.34. Detail of plate 84 showing a steam-driven pleasure *mayurpankhi* (peacock-prowed boat)

same period saw even greater expansion of textile factories in England, which now looked to the subcontinent as a market.

From early in his involvement with India's movement for political independence, Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi focused popular sentiment through powerful symbolic statements using the economics of daily life. In the 1920s he glorified *khadi* (handspun and handwoven cloth) and the *charkha* (traditional spinning wheel) to emphasize India's need for self-sufficiency in the face of British economic domination, epitomized by imported "Manchester" cloth. Although spinning, as opposed to weaving, had in most of the subcontinent been the purview of women, Gandhi reframed it as "the hope of the masses." But it was *khadi*, the cloth itself, that resonated loudest and longest as a symbol of national empowerment, and that gave textiles a special potency.<sup>25</sup>

After 1947, *phulkaris*, the floss-silk embroidered head coverings of the Punjab, were promoted as symbolic of unified Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> In the eyes of East Pakistan, however, the government's focus on this product as representative of the nation as a whole echoed and emphasized the imposition of Punjabi culture on Bengal. Among the ways that East Pakistan manifested resistance was through the symbolism implicit in women's dress and accoutrements, including the right to wear a forehead mark and ornament the hair with flowers.

While women saw their symbolic selves—specifically, their dress—made into a rhetorical battleground in the years leading up to the Bangladesh war, during the invasion their physical bodies became a literal battleground, with the invading army using mass rape to "purify" what they regarded as polluted Islam. The ravages of war on domestic routines, like the scars upon individual women, were slow to heal.<sup>27</sup> Although vibrant art-making traditions continued on both sides of the border, many domestic arts, including the making of *alpanas* and *kanthas*, already severely diminished, were dealt a near-death blow. In the following years, the general economic situation in Bangladesh was grim indeed.

Given this history, it is not surprising that the *kantha* soon became the opposite number to the



*phulkari*, representing the rise of Bangla pride and of Bangladesh itself. Jasimuddin, who had written an elegy to the kantha (*Nakshi Kanthar Math*) half a century earlier, was designated the national poet of the new nation of Bangladesh. The kantha revival began slowly in the 1970s, as various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) sought to foster this indigenous craft to provide women with a livelihood and the new nation a source of national and regional pride.

The kantha work that is so immensely popular across India and Bangladesh today is the result of this revival, which was taken up only somewhat later across the border in West Bengal. It differs from the earlier domestic tradition not only in intention but also in authorship and technique.<sup>28</sup> The materials used to make kantha products are uniformly new, and the women, often without previous training in embroidery,<sup>29</sup> are taught a pared-down skill set and supplied with designs pre-drawn on the base cloth (fig. 1.35). Frequently these designs are adapted from works in museum collections and from published photographs of historical kanthas.

In her groundbreaking 1981 book *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, Niaz Zaman gives a succinct account of the kantha revival's beginning. Describing the commissioning of kanthas in the late 1970s to decorate the new Sonargaon Hotel in Dacca, a breakthrough event for the revival movement, she writes that the question was whether Bangladeshi NGOs could "produce kanthas similar to those in Stella Kramrisch's collection."<sup>30</sup> Looking at photographs of early products from Kumudini and Aarong,<sup>31</sup> Bangladesh's major NGOs, it is clear that the designers drew heavily from Kramrisch's published kanthas. Especially popular were her three most exuberantly figured large embroideries (see plates 4, 5, 26), whose easily excerpted motifs seem to have acted as a stock image library for designers (figs. 1.36, 1.37).<sup>32</sup>

Joint workmanship soon became the norm for larger pieces (fig. 1.38), and today it is far more usual to embroider on a single layer of cloth than through multiple layers. Embroidery hoops have also come into common use (fig. 1.39), both to save time and because regularity and uniformity of the stitches and close adherence to the designer's cartoon are the aesthetic priorities, as opposed to textural variety and individual expression. Pillow and bed covers, table



mats and cloths, and wall hangings are the most frequently embroidered furnishings, while kantha-work saris, shawls, and other clothing items have skyrocketed in popularity over the past decade.

Successful and beneficial as the revival movement has been in the realm of economic development and social empowerment, and exquisite as the products often are, it differs fundamentally from the earlier, domestic tradition. In the earlier tradition, an individual woman would scavenge family garments for the fabrics and threads, imagine and lay out the design, draw the motifs, and embroider each piece for a known recipient. She consequently had total control over every stage of a process imbued with communal and personal meaning, allowing full play to her imagination. Indeed, it was the intimate creativity expressed in domestic figural kanthas that spurred both Kramrisch and the Bonovitzes to form their collections.

Another result of the kantha revival has been the renewal of scholarship on the subject. Between the seminal works of the 1930s and 1940s by Gurusaday

Fig. 1.35. A design being transferred to silk for women to embroider in kantha work at the NGO Sibon Udyog, Kolkata, 2006. Photograph by the author





Fig. 1.36. Detail of plate 5 showing the popular elephant riders and a tiger with rider

Fig. 1.37. A placemat in kantha work adapting the elephant riders and tiger motifs from plate 5, probably early 1980s. Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery, 16 1/2 x 11 inches (41.3 x 27.9 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-739

Dutt, Stella Kramrisch, and others, little appeared in South Asia until Zaman's 1981 publication. As mentioned, her book, now in its second edition, continues to constitute the most integrated survey on the subject, particularly in relation to techniques. Other invaluable contributions in the following years include the publication of two of the best-documented and largest collections of kanthas. The first of these was Perveen Ahmad's 1998 *Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, which presents a selection of the nearly one thousand works in the Bangladesh National Museum, as well as probing the difficult issue of articulating abstract design. The second was the 2000 *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* by Asis K.

Chakrabarti, which presents a selection of the two hundred kanthas in the superlative collection of the Gurusaday Museum near Kolkata, of which he was then director.<sup>33</sup> The most recent survey on the subject is Sila Basak's 2002 volume *Banglar Nakshi Kantha* (published in English translation as *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal* in 2007), which provides a rich selection of images and intriguing interviews of contemporary practitioners, although in a difficult-to-navigate format. Outside of South Asia, historical kanthas were the partial focus of a 1988 exhibition and catalogue presented by the Whitechapel Gallery, London, titled *Woven Air: The Muslin and Kantha Tradition of Bangladesh*. Studies of historical kanthas have also



appeared as journal articles or as chapters in more broadly focused volumes, and our understanding has been enriched by literature on related arts and ethnology. While many of these have been published in Bangla, the major writings on kanthas were first published in English or, as with Basak's book, appeared in translation.

### Dating and Regional Styles

Zaman, by surveying historical collections and interviewing living practitioners, made a perceptive attempt to articulate identifiable regional characteristics for works then somewhat less distant in time. Likewise, Ahmad, using the monumental Bangladesh National Museum collection together with its records and the oral history of those who formed the collection from 1965 onward, made an invaluable effort to construct an overarching typology of kanthas to more precisely determine their region and date.

When research began on the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections in preparation for this volume and exhibition, we hoped to build on this earlier scholarship through a combination of materials and technical analysis, collected inscriptions, and iconographic analysis to establish an evidence-based chronological and regional framework. While we have learned many fascinating things about kanthas, we have also discovered the difficulties—perhaps the ultimate impossibility—of creating such a structure.

As Zaman discusses in her essay in this volume, while it was not uncommon for an embroiderer to stitch her name or a domestic proverb onto a quilt, only a handful of pieces bear written dates on which to hang an absolute chronology. Two such pieces are published here: one in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 63) that bears a date equivalent to 1928; and one in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 11) that bears one equivalent to 1875, making it the earliest known inscribed kantha.

The kanthas in museum and private collections in the West and in Asia, along with those that remain in family collections in Bengal, necessarily represent only a tiny fraction of the works made over the century, as the majority of pieces were either deliberately destroyed or used, repaired, and reused until they disintegrated. Many of the pieces in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections exhibit evidence of



continuing work over extended periods of time, including changes, repairs, additions, and completions that probably occurred over generations.

Some kanthas closely related to those in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections undoubtedly continued to be made well past 1947 by women for their own use, following craft lineages passed down within families (and occasionally still alive today). However, the practice of recycling materials seems to have dwindled around the second quarter of the twentieth century, due both to the political upheavals and the ready availability of cheap thread and fabric (such as the favored red *shalu*), as well as the adoption of less labor-intensive or more “modern” techniques such as cross-stitch embroidery.<sup>34</sup>

As Anne Peranteau elucidates in her essay, the recycled nature of kantha materials and the relatively short time frame in which known historical examples were produced mean that these material

Fig. 1.38. Two women working together on a large kantha in the workshop of the West Bengal Crafts Council, Kolkata, 2009. Photograph by the author



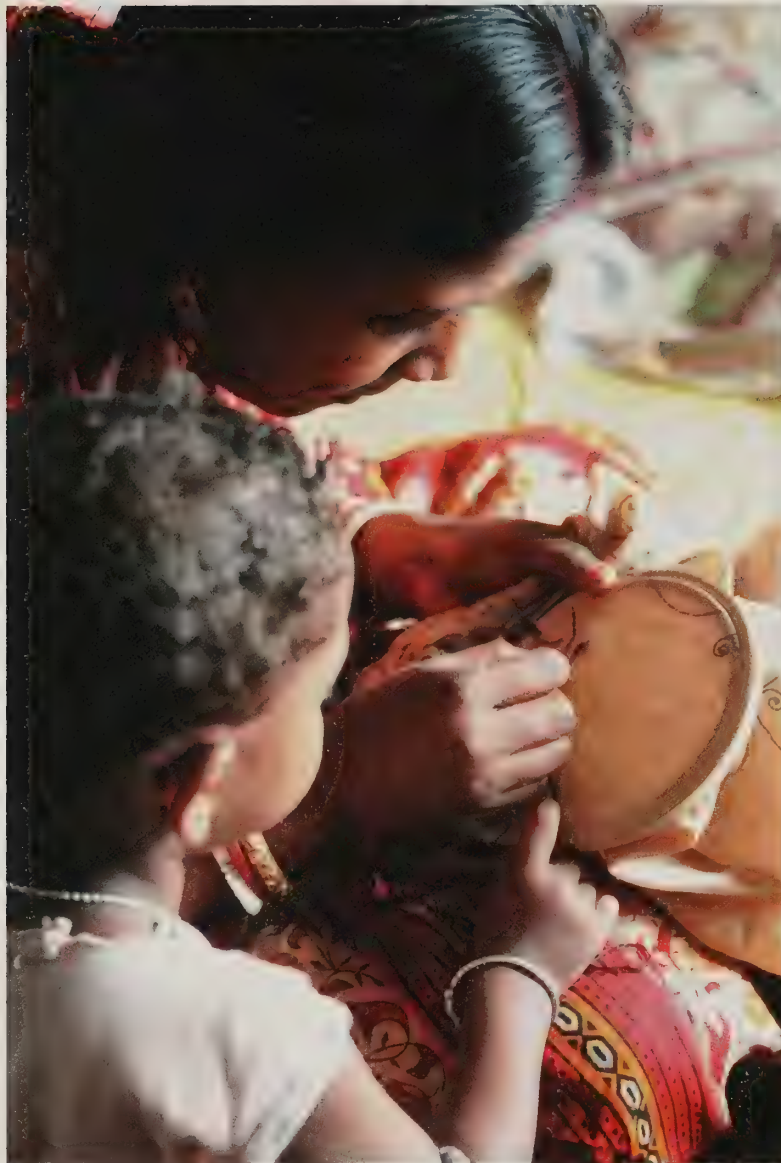


Fig. 1.39. A woman engages her daughter in her embroidery at the NGO Siban Udyog, 2006  
Photograph by the author

changes provide little help in establishing chronology. Only the most tentative conclusions are possible in terms of weaving, spinning, and dyeing, and materials alone usually cannot establish a terminal date for a particular work's creation. For example, while there is a point when machine-made fabric seems to have come into more common use, handwoven fabric continued to be employed. Since recycled fabric was the norm, pieces cannot be dated concurrent with their materials, nor can the span between a fabric's creation and its reuse be determined. In terms of

dyes, while certain types of colored thread, such as bright pink, do seem to have appeared at certain times, aniline dyes were known throughout much of the period and were used concurrently and often in conjunction with natural pigments.

The dates accompanying the plates in this volume are of two types. For pieces published by Kramrisch, we have generally retained her date and noted the source. Apart from the inscribed piece, however, these appear to have been based solely on her own sense of relative chronology, developed during her



years in Bengal. For other pieces I have given a time frame based on my own sense of relative chronology built on factors including, but not limited to, inscribed pieces, iconography, materials, and the catch-all category “style.”

In terms of regional attributions, the story is much the same. Firmly delimiting techniques, materials, and motifs within specific regional boundaries in greater Bengal is a problematic exercise for a number of reasons. For starters, the numerous changes in the regional borders have led to confusion in the literature. The districts that were the relevant political units of the Undivided Bengal of 1911–47, when most of Kramrisch’s pieces were collected, are not equivalent to the divisions or smaller districts of Bangladesh today, although many of them bear the same names (compare maps on pp. xii and xiii). Judging from provenance information retained with kanthas collected prior to 1947, the most diverse imagery, most elaborate use of narrative, and some of the finest needlework appear to have been done on kanthas produced in what were then the abutting regions of Khulna, Jessore, and Faridpur west of the Padma River. All of the pieces that Kramrisch acquired before partition are listed as coming from these three districts, most of which today lie inside Bangladesh (with a portion of Jessore in India).

The relationship between these locales must also be considered. Before 1947, for example, the city of Dacca lay about twenty miles east of the borders of Faridpur District; on the other side, Calcutta lay about twenty-five miles west of Khulna’s boundary. However, with the national divide so firmly embedded in the consciousness of the past three generations, it is easy to forget that these areas—especially Khulna and Jessore—were far more in the cultural orbit of Calcutta than of Dacca, due especially to the layout of the rail system. Indeed, most of these areas were part of West Bengal during the first partition. The current national borders resulted from a byzantine negotiation process based on bartering economic and natural resources with each side’s perception of the religious demographics and what population balance they believed they could control.

Consequently, to understand the specific geographical designation given in an earlier publication, including Kramrisch’s own, the time the attribution

was made must first be ascertained. Since Kramrisch did not document how her attributions were derived, however, one is left to assume that they represent the actual place of acquisition, as is undoubtedly true for most works in the Gurusaday and Asutosh museums and the Bangladesh National Museum. It is likely that the majority of Kramrisch’s attributions represent the place of acquisition articulated as a district of pre-1947 Undivided Bengal (see map on p. xii).

However, examining the regional attributions attached to the larger kantha collections, as well as the literature discussed above, I could not find enough distinctive and consistent typological variations in the non-attributed Kramrisch and Bonovitz kanthas to feel comfortable assigning other pieces to specific regions. With very few exceptions, then, the region for all other pieces is left unspecified. It is to be hoped that future scholarship will track down and compile all works with a known maker or place of manufacture. Perhaps then a more concrete map will emerge. However, given the irrelevance of district or division borders to everyday life and the mobility of women within the exogamous system, consistently distinguishable regional types may not exist.

Finally, it is worth noting certain terms used—or, more often, not used—in the information accompanying the plates. In the literature on kanthas, a variety of Bengali terms are used to designate quilts of particular shapes, sizes, and functions (*bayton/beyton*, *ashan*, *arshilata*, *dastarkhan*, etc.). For example, the squares that make up the majority of square pieces in the Kramrisch Collection may be generically termed *bayton* (or *bostani*), but if they were intended specifically as floor seating for Hindu prayer (*puja*), they are called *ashan* (*asana*). However, since intended use was rarely recorded by embroiderers or collectors, squares with “more” Hindu iconography have tended to receive the designation *ashan*, but inconsistently. In another instance, following Gurusaday Dutt, some scholars have used the term *sujni* to designate any large, rectangular kantha.<sup>35</sup> Terms used in the literature for other shapes are often equally problematic. Because of such uncertainties, I have chosen to omit most terms for use/size from the information accompanying the plates in this volume, although they are sometimes used in the essays.



As discussed in the information accompanying the plates of several kanthas (see, e.g., plates 50, 51, 77), the various embroidered *par* (border) patterns go by many names, most of which incorporate words that describe the dominant motif, such as *phul* (blossom), *shankh* (conch shell), *barfi* (a diamond-shaped sweet), or *mach* (fish), and many parallel patterns also found in *alpanas*. Zaman, Ahmad, and Basak all provide useful discussions on borders, along with a variety of terms for specific patterns. These terms have never been standardized and remain the purview of practitioners, however, so the nomenclature is quite fluid. I have thus made no systematic attempt to apply a descriptive term (in Bangla or English) to each border pattern.

Zaman<sup>36</sup> and, to a lesser extent, Ahmad and Basak also discuss a range of Bangla terms for stitches, techniques, and the specific motifs they engender. For the purposes of this publication, however, the decision was made to identify stitches using Mary Thomas's standardized English-language terminology. Both collections were surveyed by textile conservator Virginia Whelan, a specialist in embroidery techniques, and the list of stitches she identified accompanies each plate.

Whelan also verified the side of the cloth from which the embroiderer worked, which is not always readily evident since designs on a number of kanthas appear as nearly identical mirror images on both faces. Although such kanthas are often termed *dorukha* (two-sided), close analysis of stitches on even the most skillfully produced pieces reveals that the embroiderer worked from only one side. That *dorukha* kanthas do have a "right" or primary side is often reinforced by visual conventions for particular motifs and stories familiar from other media,<sup>37</sup> as well as by general iconographic practices, such as the placement of a divine female to her male partner's left, although even this may have exceptions.<sup>38</sup> Apart from rare aberrations (see plate 8), composition and embroidery appear invariably to have been generated from the same side of the cloth, as is evident from the frequent remnants of underdrawing. With the majority of pieces, however, while the motifs are somewhat legible from the reverse, the embroiderers clearly did not intend the two faces of the cloth to be interchangeable.

With a few noted exceptions, all kanthas in the plates section have been photographed from the side from which they were embroidered.

## Overview of the Catalogue

The five essays in this volume are intended to approach kanthas from many directions. The first, "From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households," is by art historian Pika Ghosh, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her scholarship has focused on the arts of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Bengal, especially the terra-cotta religious architecture of the region. For this essay, however, Ghosh, who was born and raised in Calcutta, explores her family's connection with kanthas in a personal reflection on the historical and continuing meaning of these objects and of the art form itself. She broadens this personal vision through ethnographic research to discuss the roles that kanthas and kantha-making continue to play in the family life and rituals of twenty-first-century Bengal, and especially their integration into domestic rituals and their role as a major element connecting generations.

Katherine Hacker, who teaches in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, has a long association with both eastern India and the textile arts. The primary focus of her research, however, has been to probe the meaning of folk art and commodification in South Asia, with particular emphasis on bronze-casting in tribal communities. With her essay "In Search of 'Living Traditions': Gurusaday Dutt, Zainul Abedin, and the Institutional Life of Kanthas," Hacker turns toward a very different group of constituents. She examines how, during the first half of the twentieth century, the kantha was transformed from the product of a women's craft into a symbol of tradition, heritage, nation, and, ultimately, fine art. By focusing on two key players, Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941) and Zainul Abedin (1914–1976), both contemporaries of Stella Kramrisch, Hacker describes this new urban interest in rural life and the search for so-called living folk traditions. Through a documentation of the growth of collections and apprecia-



tion of kanthas on both sides of Bengal's future national divide, she plumbs the origins of this domestic craft as a potent emblem of regional/national pride.

In her second essay for this volume, "Embroidering Bengal: Kantha Imagery and Regional Identity," Ghosh turns from ethnography to present a groundbreaking study of the religious narratives depicted on these textiles. While Kramrisch focused on the images in kanthas as symbols and stories linked with an ancient Indic heritage (and other scholars have generally followed her path or merely identified individual motifs), Ghosh demonstrates how these images may be far more richly understood when seen through a local lens. Equally significant, she shows that an embroiderer's imagery, far from being a random assemblage of simple if meaningful motifs around a center point, was often carefully arranged across the kantha's surface in a deliberate act of meaning-making.

Along with her writings on kanthas, Niaz Zaman, who teaches in the Department of English at Dhaka University, has published extensively on the history of women and women's literature in Bengal and Bangladesh, and is herself a creative writer. In her essay, "Women's Words / Women's Voices in the Kantha," these strands of her research unite. Zaman has been gathering examples of inscribed kanthas over many years, and she uses this written evidence to probe the layers of Bengali society and women's place in it, thereby recovering lost facets of personal history and identity.

In the final essay, "A Many-Splendored Thing: Kantha Technique and Design," textile conservator Anne Peranteau documents her analysis of the materials and techniques of the kanthas in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections, as well as comparative examples in eastern India and Bangladesh during several rounds of fieldwork there. Along with an overview of materials and techniques, Peranteau also explores the design process.

Following these essays, the volume presents the two collections, together with profiles of the collectors themselves. The exhibition that accompanies this publication is a selection from both collections and integrates the Kramrisch and Bonovitz kanthas to explore the range of the medium. For this book,

however, it was decided to separate the two collections to better understand the distinctive historical periods in which they were formed and the thought processes of the extraordinary individuals who formed them.

One of the legendary figures in the realm of South Asian scholarship, Austrian-educated art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) taught in Bengal from 1921 until 1950, primarily at the University of Calcutta. She then moved to Philadelphia, where she was Curator of Indian Art (and later Curator Emeritus) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for nearly forty years, as well as a professor at both the University of Pennsylvania and New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. As is evident from the biographical essay and her seminal 1939 article "Kanthā," reprinted in this volume, Kramrisch's approach to kanthas evolved out of her immersion in the constellation of Indic traditions and realities. She explored, taught, and wrote on a wide range of Indic arts, from second-century B.C. Buddhist stupas to eleventh-century A.D. North Indian Hindu temples; from seventeenth-century painting of the Deccan plateau to works by the modern artists she knew in pre-partition Bengal. She read deeply into the ancient texts on religion and on the artistic process. Her affinity for the underlying philosophies and cosmology of Indic thought led her to develop a deep personal devotion. Equally important, she lived for nearly thirty years in Bengal during a time when kantha-making was still a vital component of everyday life.

The engagement of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz with kanthas sprang from very different motivations and in a radically different context than that of Kramrisch. It reflects the diverse strands of their individual and joint personal histories, as explored more fully in the interview with them presented in this volume. The Bonovitzes—she a nationally recognized ceramic artist, he an innovative lawyer and executive—are major collectors of works by American self-taught (or outsider) artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although grouped by their lack of formal art training, these artists are characterized by their extremely individualistic messages, techniques, and mediums, in which humor, religious passion, dreams, obsession, and eroticism



frequently manifest. The Bonovitzes began collecting and learning about this art long before there was general interest, and they are at the forefront of education on the topic.

The Bonovitzes' interest in *kanthas* began in 2000, when their artist-friend Scott Rothstein, then living in New Delhi, brought to their attention the dynamic, vivid, and often quirky nature of the narrative imagery on *kanthas*, believing that it would appeal to their tastes and sensibilities. It did indeed, and they began to collect, always with an eye toward works that emphasized the individual voice of the artist in both imagery and technique, although also looking to represent the variety of types available.

Following each collectors' words are the plates of the collection of *kanthas* they formed. By separating the Kramrisch Collection from that of the Bonovitzes, it is possible to better understand the individual sensibilities, viewpoints, and eras that formed these similar yet distinctive collections. For example, the Kramrisch Collection includes a disproportionate number of mid-sized square pieces. Often made as ritual mats and coverings, this type carries the most complex examples of Hindu narrative imagery, the aspect of *kanthas* that most fascinated Kramrisch. The Bonovitz Collection, on the other hand, leans toward larger rectangular pieces, which often served more corporeal functions. The motifs on these pieces frequently interpret everyday images to evoke auspiciousness and modernity, exhibiting a fusion of humanity, imagination, and power analogous to that found in American self-taught art.

Although Kramrisch published black-and-white photographs of many of her pieces, this is the first time her collection has appeared as a whole and in color. The Bonovitz Collection has never before been published in any form. Through juxtaposing both collections, the imaginative beauty of this art form emerges in subtly staggering variety. Through many perspectives, many voices, and especially through the many objects themselves, it is hoped that this volume may help to uncover the manifold identities of *kanthas*, the embroidered quilts of Bengal.

## NOTES

1. The origins of the word *kantha* are obscure. Some scholars, such as Perveen Ahmad (*The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha: Bangladesh National Museum Collection* [Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997], p. iii), state that it has no known root. Others attribute its origin to a Sanskrit word. Monier-Williams (*A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, rev. ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 249] gives a Sanskrit noun *kanthā*, defined as "a rag, patched garment (especially one worn by certain ascetics)," and references both the ancient grammarian Bhartrihari and the *Panchatantra*, but gives no etymology. The more common Sanskrit word for rag is *chīra*, from the root "ci," meaning "to gather together" (*ibid.*, p. 399). It is not known whether the Bangla *kantha* derives from the more obscure Sanskrit term that itself may have migrated into Sanskrit from another language, or if it was adopted directly into the Bengal region, or if it is unrelated to the Sanskrit term.

2. The term was popularized by the poet Jasimuddin Mollah (1903–1976) in his 1929 epic poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math*, translated into English by E. M. Milford as *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt: A Tale of Two Indian Villages* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1939). This poem, which tells how a woman stitched her life story into a *kantha*, helped make these textiles a symbol of Bengali culture and, after 1971, of the new nation of Bangladesh.

3. *Sujni* is the common term for a type of *kantha*, characterized by even, parallel rows of running stitches, made especially in what is now the Hindi-speaking state of Jharkhand, India. Jharkhand was broken off from the larger state of Bihar in 2000; Bihar itself came into existence in 1911 following the first partition of Bengal. *Sujni* is also used to designate a particular type of red-ground *kantha* embroidered with white thread (see fig. 6.19).

4. Various scholars, from Gurusaday Dutt onward, have repeated that male dhotis were the favored fabric for the base cloth, but others, including Zaman and Ahmad, believe saris were the primary base material—a logical conclusion if for no other reason than that the embroidery threads came from these garments, which would not then have been discarded. Ahmad, in *Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, specifies the origins of the base cloth for each of the *kanthas* she publishes (e.g., handloom sari or dhoti, mill cloth), although she does not detail whether her determination is based primarily on width or weave. For additional discussion of base cloth, see Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing."

5. See Ruby Ghuznavi, "Muslins of Bengal," in *Textiles from India: The Global Trade: Papers Presented at a Conference on the Indian Textile Trade, Kolkata, 12–14 October 2003*, ed. Rosemary Crill (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), pp. 217–32; for the American market, see Susan Bean, "Bengal Goods for America in the Nineteenth Century," in *Textiles from India*,



pp. 303–15. For *jamdani* weaving, see Sayyada R. Ghuznavi, "Jamdani: The Legend and the Legacy," in *Textile Traditions of Bangladesh*, ed. Enamul Haque (Dhaka: National Crafts Council of Bangladesh, 2006), pp. 36–59.

6. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing." For the "kantha-like" export embroideries, see Rosemary Crill, "The Earliest Survivors? The Indian Embroideries at Harwick Hall," in *Textiles from India*, pp. 245–60. See also Satarupa Dutta Majumdar, "Satgaon Quilts: A Study," pp. 316–38 in the same volume; and Sukla Das, *Fabric Art: Heritage of India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Books, 1992), pp. 110–13.

7. In the 1911 reunification of Bengal, the Hindi- and Oriya-speaking regions to the west and south (basically the modern states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa) became a new division, as did the regions to the east up to the Burmese and Bhutanese borders (what are now the Indian states of Tripura, Meghalaya, Assam, Arunchal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland), where Burmo-Tibetan languages predominate. For the rise of industry and the growing economic divide between eastern and western Bengal, see Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, c. 1757–c. 1970 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

8. The borders of the state of West Bengal were fixed in their current configuration in 1956 as part of the States Reorganization Act. For the intricacies and ambiguities of the periods leading up to and following partition, see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge South Asian Studies no. 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society no. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

9. For an exploration of Bengali Hindu marriage and women's rituals in general, including the multifaceted nature and importance of gifting, see Lena M. Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in Bengali Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982). For a historical perspective on Bengali women's lives, see Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 31–71; Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 3–25. For an urban perspective, see also Mary Higdon Beech, "The Domestic Realm in the Lives of Hindu Women in Calcutta," in *Separate Worlds: Studies in Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1982), pp. 110–38.

10. For an overview, see Bharati Ray, "The Three Generations: Female Rivalries and the Joint Family in Bengal," in *Mind, Body, and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, ed. Rajat Kanta Ray (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 364–90.

11. While the *kula* is omnipresent even in urban Bengali weddings today, the *dheki*—a large, bulky, and somewhat archaic agricultural implement—is rarely encountered, despite (or perhaps because of) its graphic sexual connotations. Suchitra Bhattacharya, in her gloriously illustrated recent publication *Bengali Weddings* (Kolkata: SHE/Self Help Enterprise, 2007), describes the *dheki-mangal* ritual of a Muslim wedding: "The bride/groom are given grand feasts for three consecutive nights up to the wedding. On the wedding morning, a rice crusher (*dheki*) is cleaned with seven washes of water. Seven married women each smear the oil-vermillion mixture on it and touch it with their feet. A 'dhol' (Bengali drum) bursts into joyous din signaling the start of the feast. These days the custom has vanished from celebrations in big cities, even though it remains an excuse for a big traditional lunch" (p. 120).

12. Stella Kramrisch, "An Image of Aditi-Uttānapad" (1956), reprinted in *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 153–54.

13. The early works on *alpanas* by Abanindranath Tagore include *Alpona* (1919); the French *L'Alpona ou les décorations rituelles au Bengale* (Paris: Éditions Bossard, 1921); and *Banglar Brata* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1944), in which he reproduced a number of *alpanas*. Some of Tagore's illustrations were reproduced in a number of later publications, including Tapanmohan Chatterji, *Alpona: Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans Ltd., 1948); and Ajit Mookerjee, *Folk Art of Bengal* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1939; rev. ed., 1946).

14. In her 1949 essay "Kanthas of Bengal" (*Marg* 3, no. 2, pp. 18–29, 37), Kramrisch stated that the art of *alpana* was still alive, while that of kantha-making had diminished (p. 23). In a 1960 government publication, however, the authors reported: "The survey revealed that the art of Alpana is not being practiced as widely as it used to be. In several villages it is only the elderly women who possess skill and knowledge of Alpana. . . . Interest in Alpanas, as also in many traditional forms of pujas and bratas, is dwindling in the villages." *Alpana* (Delhi: Ministry of Community Development and Co-operation, Government of India, 1960), p. 10. At Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, Bengal, from the 1920s *alpana* was transformed by highly trained artists into a decorative art form used in celebrations but deliberately stripped of devotional and appellate functions. By the 1960s, the Santiniketan-style of *alpana* already had a major impact on *alpana* painting in Bengal, especially in urban settings.

15. Examples include Vedic altars, the ritually prescribed core of the Hindu-Jain temple, Buddhist *stupas*, and cosmic diagrams such as *mandalas*.

16. In much of the subcontinent, a *pandal*—a raised square platform with corner posts that support a roof or awning—is the temporary sacred space traditionally created for the



primary Hindu wedding ritual, as it is for temporary images. In Kolkata, the banana-tree square seems to be the standard locale for the tumeric "bath" (*gaye halud*), done in Bengal for the groom as well as the bride. Bhattacharya (*Bengali Weddings*, p. 91) writes that in north Bengal the trees are planted at the corners of an *alpana*, which "defines the wedding altar." She also describes a Muslim wedding tradition in the Murshidabad area in which four banana trees are planted around the corners of a stool on which the groom sits during the ceremony (p. 131).

17. The peacock is also linked with Indra, Lord of Storms. Krishna often wears a peacock-feather crown, is cooled with peacock-feather hand fans, and, in Bengal, pilots a boat with a peacock prow. For speculation on the connection between peacocks and beautiful women often seen in Bengali popular paintings and prints, see Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1999), pp. 117–18.

18. The relatively common appearance of unmistakable *lingas* in *rathas* on kanthas raises questions, since they are not seen regularly in this context; indeed, the *linga* is usually thought to be ritually anchored to its location.

19. Henry Beverley, "The Census of Bengal," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 37, no. 1 (March 1874), pp. 85–90.

20. In his foreword to the *Catalogue of Folk Art in the Asutosh Museum, Part I* (Calcutta: Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, 1962), D. P. Ghosh writes: "Fortunately a considerable portion of these creative specimens were collected before the partition of the country in 1947 under the Rural Culture Survey Scheme. Some of these forms and types, of utilitarian as well as ritualistic value, are now irretrievably lost or have undergone transformation beyond recognition, after the mass migration of village artisans from East Bengal" (p. i).

21. See Ahmad, *Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, esp. pp. 56–62 and accompanying plates.

22. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 67, although the piece she references (see plate 46) actually includes several birds.

23. A version is in the Herwitz Collection, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. See Jain, *Kalighat Painting*, p. 48, fig. 39.

24. In kanthas from this time, the use of commercially produced yarn and finished cloth is evident, as noted by Peranteau in "A Many-Splendored Thing."

25. See Lisa N. Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Susan Bean, "Gandhi and Khadi: The Fabric of Indian Independence," in *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), pp. 355–76.

26. Michelle Maskiell, "Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as 'Tradition' and 'Heritage' in Colo-

nial and Contemporary Punjab," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (May 1999), pp. 361–88.

27. The literature on the impact of partition on women is far more developed for the western than the eastern division. For the displacement of women in Bengal, see Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005); and Niaz Zaman's exploration of the theme via literature, *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

28. See also Ruby Ghuznavi, "The Tradition of Kantha and Contemporary Trends," in *Asian Embroidery*, ed. Jasleen Dhamija (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications / Crafts Council of India, 2004), pp. 131–42, esp. 140–42; and Molly Emma Aitken, *The Narrative Thread: Women's Embroidery from Rural India* (study guide; Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1999).

29. On a 2009 visit to the Kolkata embroidery workshop of the West Bengal Crafts Council, for example, only Mrs. Krishna Roy, among the eldest of the approximately twenty-five women working that day, said that she had learned embroidery as a child, noting that she had been taught by her grandmother, who had grown up in what is now Bangladesh. However, there was great interest among all the embroiderers in expanding their repertoire of stitches, including by exploring older pieces in museum collections (many had visited and closely studied such pieces, especially in the Gurusaday Museum).

30. See Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, 2d rev. ed. (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1993), p. 142.

31. Aarong is the outlet of BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee).

32. Thanks to Kramrisch's publications, multiple commercial kantha-work pieces produced by Bangladesh's various NGOs since the late 1970s have quoted freely from works in her collection. For other examples, see Zaman, *Art of Kantha Embroidery*, pp. 11, 88, and 149; Abdul Hafiz, "Embroideries of Bangladesh," in *An Anthology on Crafts of Bangladesh*, ed. Enamul Haque (Dhaka: National Crafts Council of Bangladesh, 1987), p. 32; and Sila Basak, *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007), p. 69, plate 49.

33. Additional pieces have been published in the Gurusaday Museum's *Album of Art Treasure: Kantha*, Series 1 and 2 (Kolkata: Gurusaday Dutt Folk Art Society and Gurusaday Museum, 1995, 2008).

34. Along with captions, Kramrisch give clues to her own sense of chronology. For example, in *Unknown India* she wrote, "By the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the embroidery stitch [satin stitch?] is more frequently resorted to than it was earlier. . . . The ground between figures, as often as not, is reinforced all over with stitches running in closely set parallels around each figure. . . . These colours [blue and red thread]



give a pointillistically muted tonality to the vibrant texture of the ground of *kanthas* assignable to the turn of the century" (p. 68). She continues, "Succumbing to the, in India, belated effects of the Industrial Revolution, the art of the *kantha* died after the first quarter of the twentieth century" (p. 69).

35. See Gurusaday Dutt, "The Art of the Kānthā," in *Modern Review*, October 1939, reprinted in *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1990), pp. 105–6. However, equal-sized but thicker *kanthas* of specific types may be termed *lep* (blanket) or *galicha* (rug). In her 1939 article, Kramrisch for the most part did not use terms to differentiate by use or size; she leaned in the other direction in 1949 but again chose to omit them in 1968 and later.

36. Zaman, *Art of Kantha Embroidery*, pp. 44–59. See also Zaman, "Women's Words / Women's Voices in the Kantha," this volume.

37. For example, in the familiar images of Krishna ferrying the *gopis* (see plates 1, 2, 6, 37) and of the merchant's vision of Kamalekamini (see plates 3, 4), the prows of the boats point to the viewer's left, a convention that does not seem always to hold for mere pleasure craft (compare plates 5, 84).

38. There may be instances where an embroiderer transferred a motif wholesale from a two-dimensional source (e.g., a print) by a method that reversed its orientation. See also plate 31, where the "correct" side (e.g., the side from which the piece was stitched) shows the female (possibly Radha) at the top placed at the right side of the male (possibly Krishna).







## From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households

The literature on kanthas has drawn attention to the story of recycling rags, emphasizing the resourcefulness and creativity of Bengali women, particularly in rural contexts, in salvaging and reusing worn, threadbare, and patched fabrics to fashion a new product. Stella Kramrisch, for example, wrote in the catalogue accompanying her landmark 1968 exhibition, *Unknown India*:

The *kantha*, a patched cloth, was made mainly in Eastern Bengal (East Pakistan), but also in Bihar, of worn-out and disused saris and dhotis. Their thin, white cotton cloth with its coloured borders, when getting threadbare, was cut, patched, quilted and embroidered. According to the thickness of the quilt and its size, it was used as a cover to be spread, as a wrap to be worn, or folded as a bag. . . . The material of the *kanthas* are rags and their threads. Joined afresh, these tatters are given a new wholeness.<sup>1</sup>

The investment in recycling and renewal underlying the processes of making kantha shawls, blankets, bedspreads, seating mats, infant sheets, baby blankets, and cloth diapers continues in their use, circulation, repair, and preservation in Bengali homes, often across several generations. As in the diligent and skillful layering of used cloth to create wholeness in the form of new, more durable articles, kanthas acquire additional, often intricately intertwined, layers of value as they are handed on from one owner to another, and from one generation to the next.<sup>2</sup> To the moral and economic value of thrift<sup>3</sup> that is easily discernible in the initial recycling of cloth and thread is added the social, cultural, and familial value of connectedness in this process. As a potent mechanism to nurture the ties between individuals and generations, kanthas simultaneously offer ways to locate the individual and family, embedded in relation to what is before, after, and around them.

From the many conversations I engaged in during the course of my fieldwork in the fall of 2007, I began to understand that kanthas are highly dynamic, sharing the improvisa-



tional quality of the conversations themselves, and embodying individual agency and relational value.<sup>4</sup> They become repositories of memories of particular makers, givers, recipients, and owners; of the specific occasions when they were made, given, used, repaired, and preserved; and of the intricate networks of relationships initiated, activated, transmuted, or even challenged in particular contexts of giving and using. The same kantha can thus carry a host of meanings, shared, divergent, or even conflicting, for the people who encountered or engaged with it. The accrual of associations is also an ongoing process, sometimes shifting subtly or even changing more dramatically over the course of the lifetime of the kantha.

As women rummaged through their storage trunks and steel *almirahs* (cabinets), unfolding their kanthas for my camera, the objects triggered some of these associations. In hearing their stories, I began to discern their deep emotional attachment to these cherished objects, and to realize why their owners take great efforts to care for them. As they lovingly ran their fingers through the fabrics while telling me about their kanthas and their perceptions and experiences, I began to comprehend the importance of touch, and the transmission of that touch from one user to the next. In hindsight, I am beginning to recognize the ways in which these involved and intricate processes of use and circulation transform kanthas into heirlooms as much as the sumptuousness or subtleness of embroidery with which some were lavished. I want to locate the spectacularly beautiful kanthas in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection in the intimate, emotional, and bodily practices and values that I began to comprehend. Over the course of many conversations, my understanding of the kanthas I had encountered in museum storage has shifted. My initial response to their careful, yet playful, arrangement of motifs and patterns of stitches, their composition, and the colors of their exquisite embroidery has been inflected by these accounts. It is important to note, however, that while some of the pieces in the Museum's collection bear the surface stains and repair that define them as articles of use, others may not have been used as heavily as blankets and baby sheets can be in everyday life.

Some may have been presented, perhaps in ceremonial contexts, as gifts on special occasions, prized and preserved lovingly, with painstaking diligence that itself indicates a range of meanings and values embodied by the textiles.

The personal stories about giving and using kanthas offer glimpses into particular moments in ongoing and continually changing processes of identity formation and coherence of communities. They can be read, for example, as the explicit and implied mappings of social relations from the perspective of the teller. I also recognized the authority of the owners in making particular decisions to create, give, and preserve kanthas. Through these choices they exert their power to construct, replicate, renew, renegotiate, or even challenge established alliances within and among family members, communities, and neighborhoods. By honoring some while excluding others, they mediate the existing social order in subtle yet effective ways.<sup>5</sup> They also do so in negotiating the proprieties and reciprocities associated with gift-giving.

This mapping is achieved, in part, through the travels of kanthas from one household to another, for both mundane reasons and the more special occasions. While the home is undoubtedly the primary place where women undertake the activities of making, using, and caring for kanthas, and their identity is thereby grounded in that location through these practices, the immanently portable quality of kanthas makes them useful for tracing the flows of social relations, emotional bonds, ideas, and skills. The meanings associated with kanthas, and the value that they embody, are thus not confined to a single home, and are far from limited to the moment of their use. Observations about kanthas also offer perspectives on notions of home and how these shape the individual's identity, whether the reference occurs in a comment or comparison about practices in one's mother's house as distinct from the in-laws, or in the nostalgia for an imagined "back home" laden in conversations shared about kanthas in New Jersey or Philadelphia. Kanthas in some of these conversations also indicate that the domestic is not a restricted, private space, particularly in their use for special occasions such as life-cycle rituals.<sup>6</sup> And while they have typically been associated with women, and indeed



my own study was primarily accomplished among women, it would be inaccurate to locate kanthas within an exclusively female space. For example, many of the kanthas discussed have men and boys as recipients and users. It became clear to me that although the women I spoke with undertake the initiative and the bulk of the work of preserving family heirloom kanthas, men can take equal pride in claiming and recognizing the work of a female needleworker. Through such acknowledgment, they actively construct family lore and lineages in relation to her handiwork.

My awareness of the deep significance and value of kanthas in the everyday activities of Bengali life dawned at the very end of my travel back to West Bengal in the fall of 2007. I was looking for ceremonial contexts in which kanthas were used, and had carefully timed my trip to coincide with the autumn festival season and its succession of *pujas* (practices of ritual worship) to the Hindu goddesses, the popular god Krishna, and even one celebration of family relationships.<sup>7</sup> I hoped to juxtapose photographs of these ritual contexts against their embroidered depictions in order to locate popular motifs within their cultural context. However, I did not have quite the luck I was anticipating. In fact, I found only a few contexts where kanthas were still used as seats for festive meals and as blankets for afternoon naps between rituals (figs. 2.1–2.3).<sup>8</sup> Many of the families I visited seemed to have introduced changes in a practice that I remembered vividly from watching and participating in during my own childhood, and had returned to document with digital camera and voice recorder.<sup>9</sup> I nostalgically recalled helping my grandmother and aunts and the cooks to line the length of the long *dalan* (covered veranda facing the open courtyard) of my mother's ancestral home in Bardhaman with square kantha individual seating mats. They marked the place settings for the meal, and were accompanied by bell-metal plates, bowls, and glasses before them in preparation for the male cook to serve the special festive foods in their prescribed order and arrangement on the plates.<sup>10</sup> It was one of the exciting changes from our daily life of eating at the table in Calcutta (now Kolkata). However, many of the families I visited had shifted to using plastic



Fig. 2.1. Chandra Basu displays a seating mat, Memari, Bardhaman District. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs in this essay were taken by the author in West Bengal, fall 2007



Fig. 2.2. Sima Pal, daughter-in-law of the caretaker of the Basu family estate, Memari, Bardhaman District, sets out *ashans* she has made



Fig. 2.3. Malati Das displays cross-stitched kanthas on the rooftop of the Das family home (and the author's daughter sits on one in the foreground), Hazrapara, Bishnupur, Bankura District



mats, which, in some cases, were woven into patterns that were somewhat reminiscent of kantha embroidery. Plastic was far more convenient, they explained, given the large numbers of people who ate together at these occasions. Stains from spilled food, particularly the ubiquitous yellow turmeric stains that seem to resist the most diligent cleaning, could be wiped off plastic surfaces with little effort. Others rented plastic chairs and tables, which were easier, especially on the elderly folks who might have trouble getting up from the floor. To my disappointment, these innovations also seemed to be perceived as advancement, particularly in rural contexts, over the traditional practice of eating together sitting cross-legged on the floor in long rows.

At the end of the trip, as I was packing my bags to leave, my mother came up to me and laid a folded kantha on my suitcase, and proceeded to tell me its story. "Since you have been looking for kanthas, I

thought you'd like this," she began. Preoccupied as I was with packing according to airline regulations, I didn't have the presence of mind to pull out a recorder or even a pencil to record her words. As she continued, however, she had my full attention: "This was a kantha made for my father, by Chordidi [little sister], his mother's grandmother, as she was called by just about everyone." "When was it given to him?" I asked. "It was actually given to his mother, her granddaughter, when he was born." "So it must have been made sometime around 1937? How did you get it?" "Your grandmother gave it to your sister for her Shashthi Puja. And I am giving it to you now because you are interested in these things and in history. I know it will mean something to you and you will keep it carefully." "So you've held onto this thing for over thirty years," I asked incredulously. "Yes." She smiled, and I saw the pride and satisfaction of having successfully preserved this heirloom that had been given unto her care when she was herself a young woman and new mother. I also felt a twinge of remorse for the many times I had made fun of what I perceived to be my mother's deep preoccupation with holding onto things that I would have discarded without a second thought.

On the interminably long series of flights back to Chapel Hill, as I contemplated her story, gradually some of its implications began to emerge and resonate with other conversations with the women in Kolkata, Memari, Bardhaman, Santiniketan, Dasghara, and Bishnupur whose homes I had visited in my search for kanthas. I had asked to see their kanthas, and in doing so I had sipped tea, or stayed on for lunch if their stories really moved me, or if I felt obligated to do so because they had given up their morning chores and adjusted their day for my project. Some of these women, especially those who had embroidered the kanthas, shared their handiwork with much pride and love. Others appreciated the importance of researching and bringing their everyday lives to scholarly focus and recognition, particularly in the context of an American museum and a publication that would have wide circulation. Those with whom I had sustained personal relationships, and who had participated in my earlier projects, wanted to support my efforts in doing so.<sup>2</sup> They invited me into their living rooms and





kitchens, and into their bedrooms (fig. 2.4), where the kanthas were stored in trunks under the bed or above the steel *almirahs*. They adjusted their hair and their saris for my camera. They motioned for me to sit on their beds, where they spread the fabrics out, and they took me up to the moss-lined rooftops where kanthas were billowing from clotheslines in the crisp sunshine of autumn afternoons (fig. 2.5). The generosity of these women in opening their doors and inviting me into the most intimate spaces of their lives and homes, often for several return visits following the initial conversations, extended the narratives of their kanthas into my life. In turn, I brought these back to my laptop, and into my own home in Chapel Hill.

The majority of these conversations took place with women in Kolkata, my home for eighteen years before I entered the academic world of art history and art museums in the United States. The metropo-



lis has subsequently transformed into something different for me, still sort of home, to which I return annually for smaller periods of a few months, but the city has also transformed into a base from which I am able to do my work as an art historian. It is also a deeply valued personal resource to which I turn to replenish my own sense of self as a middle-class Bengali woman, and renew the familial bonds with members scattered across three continents. This essay draws directly from these dimensions of my experience in the city.<sup>12</sup> What I learned, what I could and could not ask, and what I was told were inevitably intertwined with aspects of my own identity that I presented in both deliberate and less self-aware ways, and with how I was received. The intimate observations and stories about kanthas were shared by women with whom I either had longstanding relationships from these two general personal

Fig. 2.4. Nibedita Basu unfolds her son Deep's kanthas on the bed, Kantapur, North Calcutta

Fig. 2.5. Cross-stitch kanthas displayed by Malati Das on the rooftop of the Das family home, Hazrapara, Bishnupur Bankura District



and professional contexts, or who were introduced to me through these connections. Conversely, it was only possible to have such access to the kind of intimate and also ordinary information because I too belong, in some general ways, to the cultural world inhabited by kanthas. I was welcomed into homes as somewhat of a local, despite the distance and awkwardness of someone who lives and works in the United States, walks around with a big, expensive camera, and wants to question and know about what is so obvious, and taken for granted.<sup>13</sup> We responded to each other with the intimate familiarity of knowing looks, half-finished gestures, and tears that clearly drew upon our common knowledge and experiences.<sup>14</sup> For some, I was the friend of a daughter, and for others the relative of an employer, or the sister-in-law of a beloved nephew, or the woman who visits our temples every year. The social proprieties and boundaries of such relationships and the particular context of each conversation delineated the contours of our discussions, and also created peculiar constraints. In some cases, with increasing proximity and time spent together, these relationships themselves shifted.<sup>15</sup> My own relatives seemed to just toss out offhand and casual observations that I did not even recognize as information at the time because of the context, and the ways in which the material was presented, intertwined in the business of our daily lives.

From these crisscrossing networks of personal and professional ties, which I recognized would offer me certain advantages in entering personal realms, I tried to cast my net as wide as I could in seeking out families interested in kanthas and their making and use. I visited a wide range of neighborhoods, from the older historic areas of North Calcutta where some of the families had settled as early as the eighteenth century, when the mercantile opportunities opened up by British trade attracted pioneering merchants from the Bengali countryside, to the relatively newer communities in the southern areas of the city, some developing from the overflow and congestion of the north, and others specifically associated with the migrant resettlements of the twentieth century, with the partitioning of Bengal and the birth of Bangladesh. Kanthas offer us tantalizing glimpses into the deli-

cate negotiations of authority that take place in these homes in myriad ways every day. The intimate and intricately interwoven processes of kantha making, gift giving, and caretaking complicate many of the traditional hierarchies that are often assumed about domestic relationships and practices. For example, in two of the families represented here, the maids played significant roles in making kanthas, introducing the practice into their adoptive households, even teaching their employers the ins and outs of the craft, with all its minutiae and niceties, and offering gifts that suggest subtleties and emotional ties beyond any simple transaction between employer and domestic help. Aside from questions of class, the practices of these women also offer us ways to contemplate the flows between rural and urban settings. The travels of kanthas and the skills involved in their making can be active agents in shaping these women's experiences both in the city homes and families they adopt as well as in those they either leave behind permanently or visit sporadically.

Outside Kolkata, I also spoke with women of clearly non-elite backgrounds in smaller towns in the districts of Bankura, Bardhaman, Birbhum, and Hooghly in West Bengal. In the United States, I have been privileged to learn the personal stories of women in New Jersey, North Carolina, Philadelphia, Houston, and Dallas, which extended my own understanding of what kanthas mean to Bengali women as they move to inhabit spaces beyond those occupied by their mothers and grandmothers. While this provides some regional variation to the discussion, it remains fragmentary in many ways. An ethnographic quest for traces of the relatively more continuous practices of kantha making and use in Bangladesh, as well as the significant changes arising from the newer initiatives spearheaded primarily by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), would surely inflect and enrich this discussion, if not take it in entirely different directions. Equally partial is the slant toward Hindu households in this essay, although some of the practices discussed here are shared among Bengalis. However, I do not intend to minimize the differentiations arising from religious or cultural Hindu or Muslim orientations.<sup>16</sup> I explore this very tentatively in juxtaposing two narratives of



deep personal loss, one which I was told, and another imagined in a poem. I am deeply aware, though, that other particularized practices of using kanthas, such as for the prayer mats women use in Dhaka homes, or for wrapping the Quran and other prayer books, and the inherent potential for these kanthas in the transmission of spirituality, faith, and sacred knowledge from one user to the next remain to be considered. Limited though the range of my experiences undoubtedly is, it was invaluable for gaining preliminary general insights into the cultural value of kanthas among the people with whom I had the opportunity to engage.

Perhaps the most potent strand that runs through the personal stories I was honored to hear is the emotional value of the kanthas for their makers and owners. My mother's story of receiving and handing me her cherished kantha made me aware that the worth of these objects derives in significant part from the very process of handing down, regardless of how elaborate or beautiful the embroidery may be.<sup>17</sup> Kanthas can invoke the touch of many hands, known and unknown to each owner. They can also conjure images of many homes, and with them, imaginary homelands. In Houston, Bulbul (Chandrabali Basu), a young woman in her twenties, took from her closet a kantha with yellow and brown embroidery that had grayed and softened with age. Her paternal grandmother had made it for her, celebrating the arrival of the first granddaughter in a large joint family home in North Calcutta.<sup>18</sup> After the baby became older and the kantha was no longer used, her mother had put it away and kept it carefully, and gave it to Bulbul at the birth of her daughter, Urvi. As Bulbul spread the kantha on the carpeted living room floor of her apartment and sat her year-old infant on it with her stuffed toys and pacifier, the rumpled and soiled textile evoked memories of her grandmother and her mother and her own childhood and home in Calcutta. She was today propping her baby on a kantha that she had sat on about twenty-five years earlier. Simultaneously, she was engaging in the same role as her mother, who had then taken measures to preserve the kantha until the time had come to hand it on for the next generation. In replicating her mother's acts, Bulbul extends to Urvi her grand-



mother and great grandmother's embrace. The kantha thus helps bridge the distance across continents that separates them, and functions as a conduit across multiple generations of women.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most poignant accounts about kanthas that I was privileged to hear surrounds the memory of a young woman who had passed away tragically, leaving her family devastated. I spoke at some length with three women of the Nag Chaudhuri family at their Jodhpur Park home in South Calcutta (figs. 2.6–2.10). Anima and Banasree Nag Chaudhuri are sisters-in-law who share a passion for sewing, and for making kanthas in particular, one they have been able to indulge with greater freedom with the decrease of

Fig. 2.6. The Nag Chaudhuri family's living room in Jodhpur Park. The kantha sari displayed on the coffee table was made by Banasree Nag Chaudhuri, who is drawing border motifs for my clarification. Sagarmoni Sarkar is seated at the back.

Fig. 2.7. Anima Nag Chaudhuri and Sagarmoni Sarkar display a quilt cover made by Banasree Nag Chaudhuri from patching leftover pieces of fabric she saved. This alerted me to the range of cloth articles associated with kanthas.





Fig. 2.8. Banasree Nag Chaudhuri displays a kantha that she used to identify a range of border motifs for me



Fig. 2.9. Anima Nag Chaudhuri's silk kantha embroidered with the story of the clever bird Tuntuni. It was made for her grandson Akash and is now being repaired

household responsibilities as their children have grown and made their own families. The third is Sagarmoni Sarkar, a tall, elderly woman who carried herself with remarkable composure and dignity (fig. 2.11). She seated herself at the edge of the living room table on a low stool at the invitation of the other two. Her bare arms, without the traditional red, white or iron marriage bangles, and her crisp white cotton sari with the thinnest of black borders declared her status as a widow. She has worked as their domestic helper ever since she came from Kaliganj, in Khulna District, Bangladesh, in search of employment, across what was then a relatively new border between India and Bangladesh in the 1960s. A young widow in her twenties, Sagar had brought with her the range of skills involved in making kanthas, as well as expertise in embroidery from her girlhood days, which she continued to practice in her spare time in the afternoons. When it caught the eye of her employer, she shared her technical knowledge and expertise, and Banasree Nag Chaudhuri embraced the practice, bringing to it her own skills, creativity, and interests.<sup>20</sup> Over the course of the afternoon, they showed me a range of kanthas and other embroideries each of them had made, shared stories about particularly meaningful ones, and helped me photograph some of them. Sagar

had made some for the two daughters of her employer's family, with whom she clearly shared a close bond. The girls, in turn, called her Mana ("not mother"), an endearing term they had coined to articulate the special relationship whereby she had nurtured them like a mother, even though she had not given birth to them. One of these kanthas had been made for Deepa, the younger girl, who later passed away at the age of nineteen, during her first year of college. It was a tragedy of unspeakable proportions, and I was only able to put the pieces together through conversations with various family members. The kantha made by Sagar for Deepa was later given by her mother for the daughters of Rupa, her older sister. Another family member later reflected that the kantha was perhaps given to these girls to introduce them to, and establish a tangible bond with, the aunt whom they had never known. She also pointed out that Deepa herself had begun to sew when she was so sick that she could no longer continue her studies, and had made various articles to give to her cousins, friends, and other loved ones. Perhaps she had some awareness of her impending death, and had sought to reaffirm emotional connections and offer some consolation through the embroideries she had made for them.<sup>21</sup> In this household where embroidery and





stitching are enthusiastically cultivated and deeply appreciated, giving Deepa's kantha to her nieces must have been particularly meaningful. I was also moved by the reciprocities in the multiple acts of giving textile articles, and the importance of connecting people through them.

The dynamism and potency of an embroidered kantha to shape experiences as much as it is shaped by them is explored eloquently by the poet Jasimuddin in his long narrative work, *Nakshi Kanthar Math*.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the poem, the kantha made by the hero's wife Shaju during their long and painful separation, and embroidered with visual narratives of their relationship, serves as a source of comfort for Rupa when he returns after serving a prison sentence to find that she had died from loneliness and grief. Reminiscent of Penelope in Homer's *Ulysses*, Shaju had turned to embroidery as a way to endure the separation, both to pass the time and as a venue for the expression of her thoughts and emotions:

Spreading the embroidered quilt  
She works the livelong night,  
As if the quilt her poet were  
Of her bereaved plight.  
Many a joy and many a sorrow

Is written on its breast;  
The story of Rupa's life is there,  
Line by line expressed.

Beginning with her life as a beloved daughter and then a wife, Shaju stitched the farewell scene when her husband departed. And as she gradually gave up hope of his return and a reunion, she depicted her own tomb with her husband at her side. The kantha serves as a repository of her tears and her sorrow, and also as a potential source of solace for her husband. Anticipating his loss, Shaju instructed her mother:

How will he bear this pain, mother  
On this quilt lies all of mine;  
All my pain and all my grief,  
Embroidered line by line.  
So lay it on my grave, mother,  
This picture of my grief,  
That his and mine upon its breast,  
May mingling find relief.

One of the final images of the poem describes the husband lying at her grave wrapped in the kantha that she had stitched as a coping mechanism during

Fig. 2.10. Detail of Anima Nag Chaudhuri's kantha for her grandson Akash

Fig. 2.11. Sagarmoni Sarkar points to the border of her own sari, which has a design often embroidered on kanthas



their separation, now serving as "his embroidered shroud."<sup>23</sup> Here the kantha is conceived as a surrogate for his wife's arms, and almost anthropomorphized into her embrace. It is the repository of her touch, imbued during the process of embroidering and also the wiping of her tears, as well as of her intent to leave the kantha to offer him solace. The kantha draping his body perhaps provides the consolation he sought in reaching out for her through the barrier of the tomb.

The poem, like the accounts discussed earlier, alerts us to an aspect of kanthas that is not so readily visible from textiles hanging on museum walls: that meaning accrues as kanthas are given and used, much as it does with family jewelry or other heirlooms. This can take the form of rejoicing over a new birth, or offering some recompense for the loss of a loved one and celebrating cherished memories. Conversely, the process of bestowing kanthas on family members and the next generation of users also marks interpersonal relationships and endows social identity.

A significant part of this transmission happens through touch and bodily contact, and it is important to situate kanthas in the range of bodily practices in which the objects participate. Hindu ceremonial contexts in which kanthas are often given are weddings and two occasions celebrating a new baby—Shashthi Puja, the ritual worship of the goddess Shashthi performed to protect infants, and *annaprasana*, the rice-eating ceremony symbolically marking the first solid foods given to the infant at about six or seven months, around the time of the arrival of the first teeth. Kanthas mark these occasions, and also the body of the person wearing the shawl, or covered in the blanket. The chain of relationships, transmitted through touch, beginning with that of the woman who stitched the kantha, or extending further back to the owner of the article from which fabric was extricated to make the kantha, shape the bodily identity of the user. In this context, kanthas can perhaps be interpreted as part of the complex technologies for locating bodies in socially and spatially defined communities.<sup>24</sup>

The Shashthi Puja is a striking example of physically endowing the body of the new baby with its familial, social, and religious identity. The goddess Shashthi is usually called on to shield the vulnerable

neonate from disease and death.<sup>25</sup> When I followed up on the kantha that my mother had given me, she briefly outlined the basics of this ceremony when it was performed following the birth of her second daughter over thirty years ago. In her recollection two things stood out: that the scrawny naked infant was put down on the floor, on a kantha, and offered to the divine for her physical wellbeing. I mulled over the implications. This kantha, in which her father had been wrapped, and which had been given from the maternal side of his family, physically invoked those family networks and imprinted identity upon the infant when less than a month old. My mother mused in response: he is closer to his mother's side of the family, and she to her father's, perhaps implying that the kantha may have had something to do with securing their ties of affection and loyalty.

Such blankets for receiving babies are also particularly useful for reminding us of the multiple pairs of hands that handled and left their touch upon the textile in everyday contexts of use, complicating the chain of circulation. Kanthas that nestle babies on one side, in that process are themselves cradled by mothers and fathers, grandparents, older siblings, nannies, aunts and uncles. They may have held the kantha to their chest to burp the baby after a meal, or pat a crying infant, or put the baby down in their lap to rock it to sleep. Such experiences would have been accompanied by lullabies, nonsense rhymes, consoling sounds and words. The baby may have cried, sniffed, gurgled in happiness, or cooed contentedly while dozing off. The act of unfolding baby blankets from their storage chests were catalysts for vivid memories of such precious, intimate, and multisensory experiences. As multiple generations of babies are cuddled in the same kantha, as also in the case of Chandrabali and Urvi's kantha, the layers of memories thicken and interweave.

The faint brown stains on many of these baby kanthas index bodily processes with all their smells, textures, tastes, sights, sounds, and insights.<sup>26</sup> Two generations of spit-up, milk, baby food, and other forms of egestion leave their persistent trace. And the kanthas impart identity upon the babies who had been held in them, the accretions of the first-generation use layering upon that of the next baby.



Although irretrievable, the kanthas in the Museum's collection must also testify to such intricate relationships and processes of caregiving in their accumulation of residues from bodily contact, not unlike the vermilion marking the foreheads of some of the Museum's stone sculpture.<sup>27</sup>

Kanthas also offer us a way to understand the familial ties secured at weddings.<sup>28</sup> The groom, upon his arrival at the home of the bride, is given a set of clothes by the bride's family as part of the preparation for the evening *kanyadan*, the ceremonial giving of the bride from her father to husband, presided over by the priest and witnessed by Agni, the divine priest, present in the fire. The groom typically changes into these clothes, thus receiving the bride while he is himself draped in attire from her family, and thereby located bodily and spatially in her natal terrain. The upper garment in this case is often a thin kantha shawl (*chadar*). The shawl can thus be situated among the implements that inscribe a new identity upon his vulnerable body at a momentous personal transition, akin to the baby's receiving blanket. When the object is made especially for the occasion of a daughter's wedding by her mother, or in some cases, by the bride herself, it takes on greater significance.<sup>29</sup> The idea of connectedness evoked in wrapping the groom in a fabric presented by the bride's family is reinforced when that shawl is tied to the end of the bride's sari (*anchal*) and they walk around the sacrificial fire seven times (*shaptapadi*). Bride and groom are bound together by this process literally. Their steps have to coordinate as they circumambulate the fire in order not to trip.<sup>30</sup> Traces of vermilion remaining on wedding shawls, years after the ceremony, bear witness to another rite, when the groom spreads *sindur* in the parting of the bride's hair for the first time, signifying his acceptance of her. It is an act that she will repeat for herself daily from that day onward, thereby locating herself in relation to him and proclaiming her marital status. The garment can be understood as potentially an agent of transformation in this series of exchanges and acts. Kanthas thereby tie the bride and groom's bodies, consolidate their identities, family relationships, and social values such as those of obligation, loyalty, and commitment to the bride and her family.

When a kantha is created from cloth that was already personally meaningful, the transmissions may be as richly layered as the constituent fragments of the kantha itself.<sup>31</sup> I had the opportunity to contemplate such implications in my conversations with Gauri Bachkha (fig. 2.12), who has worked as a cook for the Das family at Gol Park, in South Calcutta, ever since she moved to the city from her village in Lakshmikantapur, in Twenty-four Parganas District. Although a small woman, she has extraordinary presence, with her erect posture, arched back, and commanding voice. Since the death of Jayasree, her employer, she has taken over significant aspects of the role of the housewife. For a decade, she has been doing the daily morning and evening *puja* at their home shrine, a role typically performed by the women of the house, and determining what groceries to buy, making decisions every day regarding which fish is too expensive to buy, and what to serve at each meal, not just cooking to instruction as most cooks do. When the son got married, she embraced Papia as the daughter-in-law into the household. I have repeatedly heard an anecdote that indicates not only her authority in the home, but also her sensitivity to domestic proprieties. Gauri offered the young bride a dressing gown as she emerged from her bedroom the morning after the wedding, so that the new daughter-in-law was appropriately clad when presented to the large joint family. I noticed that she keeps the house keys tied to the end of her sari, hanging down her back, a highly symbolic act indicating her access and authority in the domestic sphere. And I observed that she always asks me directly if I will be staying for lunch when I visit, rather than waiting to be told. Since the couple has had a baby, she has taken care of Spandan like a grandmother, bathing, feeding, telling him stories, hugging, teasing, and reprimanding him. In his mother's words, "My son even eats better when Gauri feeds her [than when I do], and she disapproves whenever I take him anywhere for vacations, complaining that he's lost weight [in the absence of her careful supervision]."

In anticipation of the boy's birth, Gauri had made kanthas in the afternoons during her spare time. "This is what we do," she stated. Although I did not get to see the kanthas because Spandan had outgrown them



Fig. 2.12. Gauri Bachkha folding a kantha, Das family residence, South Calcutta

and they had been handed on to other babies since, I learned about them over numerous conversations with the two women. Over the years, Papia has given her saris, on special occasions such as *pujas*, or as gifts from trips away, and even the set of her grandmother's saris, which she inherited at the time of her death. The last is particularly significant because she loved this grandmother dearly, and these were the only things she got at the time of her death when personal belongings were distributed among family members. The use of some of these saris for making kanthas for her son seemed especially powerful to me. The saris had been worn by the boy's mother's grandmother to whom she had been so attached, and then again by Gauri, who was a grandmother to him. Gauri was herself much more matter of fact, though, pointing out that when the saris were threadbare they were no longer usable, and that the cloth was suitably soft from wear for the baby's tender skin. Yet I could not help pondering about the multiple transmissions in such practices. The baby was put to sleep on the cool floor on hot summer afternoons on layers of fabric softened and worn by a great-grandmother he had never known, but who had loved his mother dearly, and nurtured her during her childhood. If Gauri had selected the softest parts of the sari, as is typically

done for baby articles, these would likely have been the most worn areas, such as those used to wipe wet hands during cooking, for preparing *pan* (betel), or for washing dishes. Much like aprons, the hip and thigh areas of everyday-wear saris bear stains and get most threadbare. They would therefore be the softest and hence useful as the inner square layers of kanthas. When covered by a clean outer layer that would bear the embroidery, the persistent stains would be concealed, and the used, even frayed or patched, cloth would be utilized successfully. Spandan's kanthas also bear the touch of Gauri, a grandmother who had stepped in to fill the role of the paternal grandmother who was no longer alive. These were also saris Gauri herself had worn and likely cooked and cleaned in. And the warmth of her touch was renewed each time she sang to him, and stroked his head to put the boy to sleep on kanthas she had stitched for him.

Transmission of touch, particularly through textiles, is not unusual and can be found in many South Asian contexts. It is a familiar practice, for example, to give saris or shawls to one's guru, who wears them once and returns them, and the devotee absorbs the guru's blessings into her own body when wearing the blessed article. Such practices of embodiment also occur in temples.<sup>32</sup> At the temple of Banke Bihari in Vrindavan, Krishna, for example, was dressed in jeans and equipped with a toy cell phone belonging to a sick boy upon the request of his parents. Through contact with the god's body, the clothing and accessories would transfer the god's touch to the child when he was too ill to get to the temple for *darshan*, the reciprocal exchange of looks between deity and devotee that is believed to bestow the blessings of the divine upon the worshiper.<sup>33</sup> In turn, *darshan* itself has been understood as an active and bodily engagement, a grasping, much like the physical ingestion of divine grace through the consumption of *prasad*, the leftovers from the gods' meal.<sup>34</sup> Practices of ceremonial robing in Bengal and in many other areas of South Asia also have a long history in courtly contexts for transferring authority from the ruler to his allies (*khillat*).<sup>35</sup> Thus expressing relationships and emotions through fabrics by sharing bodily contact is by no means exclusive to the domestic sphere. In the context of kanthas, however, they may take on further





nuances when the continuities of use and giving go farther back to their making and reuse of old cloth.

The tactile experience of using kanthas described above begins with the intricate processes of their making. In Sagar, Anima, and Banasree Nag Chaudhuri's discussion of their engagement in these activities, I noticed the emphasis upon the corporeal dimensions of their experience. Sagar in particular explained how important and tricky it was to prepare the inner thin layers of cloth (*kantha pata*), which are often themselves assembled by patching rags. These are placed carefully, one on top of the other, smoothed down by patting with one's hands to avoid any folds or wrinkles, and then secured with date thorns and then loose stitches (*kantha atkano*). At this point Banasree Nag Chaudhuri intervened to alert me that in the urban context, embroidery pins, the ones with pearly heads, substitute for the date thorns of Sagar's village home. Together they reminisced about the physical discomfort and even pain involved in the process: how the eyes are strained by the close hand-to-eye coordination required to embroider, how the fingers get marked and the skin broken by the end of the needle prodding into the skin, and how the shoulders hurt from bending too long.<sup>36</sup> Yet, they endured it, even enjoying the process.

They described the addictive pleasure (*nesha*) when one really gets into the embroidering, often staying up too late at night, or working in the dim glow of candlelight. They reminisced how hard it was to put the emerging motif aside as it was flowering (*phute otha*), or as the fingers got into the rhythm of executing the running stitch with precision, picking up uniform numbers of threads with the needle, so that the length of each stitch and the space between them evened out. As the needle advanced, the length of fabric left behind in the other hand grew to add to the satisfaction of accomplishment. From my own minimal engagement with embroidery, I observed that the acute physical sensation is very personal, an intimate reconnecting with oneself. The nostalgia for that feeling of exhilaration arising from the engagement of mind and body was easily visible in their smiles as they remembered how difficult it was, in their younger days, when they had a lot of domestic responsibilities, to turn away in order to tend to household chores like cooking dinner or taking care of the chil-

dren. They recalled being chided for neglecting some of these daily domestic duties as they relished their quiet time in the silence of the night.

This discussion reminded me of my own childhood participation in the making of kanthas. I shared with them fleeting memories of afternoons when my grandmother put on her glasses and sat down to pull single threads from the red borders of her old saris, with her long black hair spread to dry in the sun.<sup>37</sup> They were to make kanthas for the new baby, my sister, who was to arrive that winter. In hindsight, I recognize in her ways of engaging me in the activity an attempt to prepare and reorient a single child for the arrival of a sibling. I remember vividly her cracked fingers, stained red from turmeric, lime, and betel, deftly working on disentangling the rolls of borders she had already assembled. I held those threads and rolled them individually for her. As she handed them to me, I tried to be careful not to tangle the long lengths in my four-year-old fingers. The threads connected us, tangibly establishing a bodily rhythm extending from one set of hands to the other, and through repetition, the physical contact created a shared sense of accomplishment and renewed the emotional bond.<sup>38</sup> In sharing that incident with these women, who are themselves grandmothers, the memory of those intertwining hands engaged in making a baby kantha was particularly powerful. It reconnected me to my grandmother who was no longer alive. It also gave me a way to relate to their loss of a daughter who had also taken up the family practice of sewing.

These experiences underscore the visceral nature of the numerous practices involved in making kanthas, and of the individual's body at the center of it. The act of remembering the pattern of executing the running stitch between the needle, cloth, and fingers and implementing it with speed and precision is inherently bodily. Through continuous repetition of the stitches, the movement of the fingers guiding the needle, and the raising of the arm to pull it, connect the mind and body. In Paul Connerton's terms, the memory for such skills is "sedimented or amassed in the body."<sup>39</sup> The body serves as the starting point for the activity, and the product is defined and delimited by the body. In the coordination between two sets of





Fig. 2.13. Detail of plate 57.  
Dense white stitches fill the  
surfaces of some kanthas.

hands, separating and peeling the threads of a rolled-up sari border, handing it over, and then rolling it up again, is also a physicality that is the basis for the intimacy between the two interactively engaged bodies.<sup>40</sup> Useful here is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reminder that the body is never just an object in the world, but the very ground of perception whereby our world comes into being.<sup>41</sup>

From this perspective, repeated acts of stitching, whether creating the dense white stitches filling the surface of a kantha (fig. 2.13), or the repeated motifs such as evenly spaced whorls (see plate 58), each composed from the juxtaposition of parallel stitches, and with their variations upon the basic form, can perhaps be understood as viscerally grounded acts of meditation. Can we begin to think of such individual and deeply personal acts of embroidery as akin, in some ways, to other better-recognized meditative processes such as the sand mandalas made by Tibetan monks? Names assigned to this form, such as *Shashthir chihno* (the sign of the goddess Shashthi, perhaps reflective of its resemblance to the swastikas employed to designate this deity in ritual worship), are suggestive of devotional practices generally, or possibly specific ones that may have once been asso-

ciated with the practice of embroidering the motif at a particular historical moment that is now forgotten. Another name for this motif, *golok dhandha* (maze), also evokes physical dimensions of the act of concentration. The process of negotiating a maze, where one can get lost or find an end, can serve as a metaphor for spiritual journeys and practices of self-cultivation. The implements used to create the kantha—cloth, needle, and thread—can then be perceived as the tools for structuring a deeply personal, and spiritual experience in the everyday, domestic context.

Another kantha shawl (*chadar*) in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 74), inscribed throughout its length with the chant *Hare Rama Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*,<sup>42</sup> which reverberates in homes, temples, and street processions in Bengali towns and villages devoted to Krishna, perhaps explicitly makes such embroidered acts of meditation visible.<sup>43</sup> Assiduous stitched repetition of sacred words, along with the repetition of uniform stitches to create them, may have physically cultivated a meditative state analogous to that experienced by women who sit at their altars chanting the names of god, keeping count with the help of *rudraksha* bead rosaries. In the Bengali Vaishnava context, remembrance of Krishna in the repeated articulation of his names, whether verbal or visual, is regarded as one of the most effective forms of reaching him.<sup>44</sup> The blessings invoked in the act of embroidering the names of god, and the divine protection embodied in the prayers stitched on the shawl, would then sheath the body of the recipient like a blanket. It would permeate the draped torso like other articles blessed by divine contact, or a holy person's touch, are incorporated into one's body.

Bodily and emotional experiences are layered upon kanthas with their movement from individual to individual, and from home to home. And in the inherent portability of kantha articles also lies their exciting potential to inform the conventions of one family with the kantha-making practices of another, when, for example, kanthas arrive as part of the wedding or baby trousseau. To ignore their travels would also suggest a limited understanding of the home as segregated space rather than as a kind of entrepôt in the flow of objects, ideas, social interactions, and emotions.<sup>45</sup> Nibedita Basu, who is a young mother,



showed me kanthas that had been given for her son Deep's Shashthi Puja (fig. 2.14). Shashthi Puja kanthas are typically smaller in size, as they are made for the very young baby, given as part of the trousseau assembled for such occasions. (The ceremony is usually performed when the infant is only twenty-one days old.) Some had been stitched by her grandmother for her, and had been given again to her baby, much like Bulbul's kantha for her daughter. Another had originally been stitched for her husband Anirban, by his father's sister. Nibedita's mother-in-law had used it for her son, and then put it away, sunning and taking care of it for about thirty years. On the occasion of her grandson's Shashthi Puja, she had arranged it on the wooden trays on which gifts are displayed, and sent it to Nibedita's parental home for Deep's ceremony, which was being hosted by her mother. The kantha had thus circulated around the city, inhabiting three homes in the course of its travels. The first movement connected the maker to her natal home, as the gift for her brother and sister-in-law's newborn, reinforced in the inscription that identifies her and the baby boy, the date of his birth, and her blessing for him. In this act of giving, the kantha functions much like the bracelets that are tied by a sister for her brother on the occasion of Rakhi to renew their affection and affiliation. It is also comparable to the sandalwood dot put by a sister on her brother's forehead for his well-being, and hence her protection, during the celebration of Bhai Phota. The second time, that same kantha was sent for the Shashthi Puja of Anirban's son's trousseau, thus ceremonially reaffirming the bonds of hospitality and responsibility with his wife Nibedita's family, bonds which had originally been established at the couple's wedding. The process of sending the kantha as part of the trousseau underscores the parallel practice that took place at the couple's wedding. The kantha thus reinforces existing familial networks, and while such mapping could be construed as essentially conservative, it inserts individuals onto the existing social map, thereby personalizing and making modifications and accommodations to it.

The active role of women in these flows is particularly striking. My mother, I noted, chose to give me a kantha that had been given to her by her mother-in-

law for my sister's birth. Yet, my mother decided to give that kantha to me rather than my sister, because, as she explained, she recognized and shared my interest in social and cultural history, and appreciated and supported my current study about kanthas. Such choices also point to complexities in the notion of ownership, where a kantha given for one daughter is then given again to another daughter. Further, she had chosen not to replicate the pattern of giving established earlier. That is, she had not given it for my daughter, her first grandchild, nor had she saved it for my sister's son, and at the time that she handed me that kantha, my sister was pregnant for the second time. Her decision removed the article from a ceremonial domain of giving to one that was much more individual. Although I never followed up on this, tracing such acts of giving and receiving could potentially reveal experiences of tension and hurt, when the anticipated patterns of giving are deflected, and expectations are not met, much like the frictions that arise in other contexts of inheritance.



Fig. 2.14. Nibedita Basu displays a kantha made for her husband and given for her son's Shashthi Puja. The border consists of a sari border (*par*) and the stitched words for "bless and welcome the new baby."



A different set of decisions was made in the case of the finely embroidered silk kantha that Anima Nag Chaudhuri had made for her grandson Akash (see figs. 2.9, 2.10). It was being saved by her daughter-in-law Tutu, for her son's wedding trousseau. This precious kantha was made of fine silk (*garod*), embroidered with the primary characters and motifs of the popular children's tale "Tuntunir Galpo," which the grandmother may even have told or read to the boy. It was done with such love and care by her mother-in-law, Tutu explained, that she couldn't bear to let a naked baby lie on it. In fact, she recalled, she had only used it one time, extremely gingerly, with a diaper on the baby, and then put the kantha away. Implicit in her choice to protect this delicate kantha from the wear of everyday use is her appreciation of its innovative iconographic scheme and beautifully detailed embroidery, and above all the love and care invested by her mother-in-law in its making. There is perhaps also recognition of the immense value of kanthas in their family and their role as active mediators of relationships. When Anima Nag Chaudhuri explained her intent to work on a kantha for her grandson, she stated that she had started working on it after she had made a highly elaborate one over two years for her daughter's wedding, and wanted to give one to her son's family. I also read in her decision an attempt to establish equilibrium, to give equally among her children, much like the choices women make to distribute family jewelry or other valuables, investing much deliberation and care in the process. When I had these conversations, Anima Nag Chaudhuri was repairing this kantha, filling the body with small, closely spaced, running stitches to secure the silk, which had split in the two decades since she had made it, despite her daughter-in-law's efforts to preserve it. In saving it for her son's wedding, Tutu would be handing it on to her own daughter-in-law, perhaps establishing their relationship with it, as her mother-in-law had affirmed theirs in the first place when making and giving it to her for her son. Here again, ownership is multiply configured, and intertwined with individual choices that are negotiated by these women; some of these choices are physically imprinted upon the object in their acts of care-taking and mending.

Kanthas thus offer us a perspective to contemplate how social relations are constituted. Through the travels of kanthas, the particular choices, the reasoning behind them, and the ways in which they are handed down can be traced, and perhaps interpreted, as a map of social realms of inclusion and exclusion, and as indicators of the authority of the women who make these choices. In some cases the text embroidered on a kantha makes such choices explicit by providing the name of the baby and the occasion for which it was made, or the name of a bride and a blessing for her, along with the date of her wedding ceremony. And inscriptions, of course, may get added with as much fluidity as the objects themselves circulate flexibly. In other cases, the experience of exclusion may be more deeply felt. It would not be entirely unlike hearing a daughter-in-law observing that the prized head of the fish is offered by her mother-in-law to her husband at lunchtime, ignoring many other potential recipients, particularly the grandchildren or the daughter-in-law herself. The articulation of such experiences of loss is contingent, of course, upon the particular contexts of the tellings.<sup>46</sup> In one instance, I wonder if her mother-in-law's presence had constrained one young woman in deference to her and the familial value of respectability. On a different rooftop, a woman whose in-laws were no longer living volunteered that no, she did not get very much from her mother-in-law. Although I did not pursue it, I wonder if she had implied that others, perhaps her sisters-in-law, had been given heirloom objects instead. In many cases, where I was introduced through specific professional and family relationships, those formal connections carried expectations of propriety that do not easily allow for such admissions. In contemplating these self-expressions, spoken, unspoken and also ineffable, it is also useful to remember that such conversations about kanthas can also be deployed strategically.<sup>47</sup>

To conceptualize kanthas as exclusively belonging to women's worlds and the domestic sphere, however, would be to ignore the larger family as a whole, its social identity, and the men who are part of these practices. I was most aware of this dimension of kanthas as documents of family history in my conversa-



tions with several members of the Sardar family at Hatibagan, Kolkata. Like many large North Calcutta mansions, their home is organized around an internal courtyard, with the formal, public, reception, and *puja* areas on the ground floor, and living areas for the various nuclear families in the three upper floors (fig. 2.15). Likewise, the roofs around the open courtyard are split and shared among these family units. It was up here that I viewed the kanthas of the various family members I had the opportunity to meet. Kanthas were hanging on clotheslines in the afternoon, along with other washed clothes that were drying in the sun (fig. 2.16). As they pulled blankets out of the thin white covers (*owar*) to display the embroidery, I couldn't resist sniffing the smell of sun-drenched blankets. We shared our various associations with kanthas sunning on rooftops—of cleanliness, comfort, luxuriance, leisure and lazing, and a general sense of well-being—that such activities carry for us (figs. 2.17, 2.18). Concomitant with and underlying these associations are fundamental assumptions about domestic stability, gender roles, and family values.

At this time I noted that several of the older kanthas were brought out by the men of the family. They engaged actively, helped spread the kanthas, offered their opinions on how best to photograph them, and to figure out the right angle in relation to the raking sunlight, or supplied a table and a child's chalkboard to use as props to do so. I was particularly struck by their enthusiastic participation in the process. Their deep sense of family pride and identity cohering around their cherished artifacts, and the processes of treasuring them, was easy to see. However, the fact that I had arrived during Durga Puja, perhaps the region's most important festival, a time when everyone was home, may also have had something to do with the presence of the men of this family.

They shared one of their most treasured family heirlooms, an elaborately designed, stunningly attractive, colorful kantha, embroidered on both sides, that is about eight generations old in the estimation of elder family members such as Jayanta and Niva Sardar (fig. 2.19). It was stitched by Sumatibala Sardar, who had probably lived in the mid to late nineteenth century. It was my impression that she is better remembered by many members of this large

joint family today for her handiwork, rather than from any events or episodes in her life, or even from photographs or correspondence. We also discussed the value of her work in relation to the market and to museum collections with examples of similar quality. I left with the impression that these kanthas were as meaningful to this family as the highly elaborate Durga Puja<sup>48</sup> that was being performed in their Durga *dalan* (covered veranda) downstairs, which they had showed me with equal pride in the family's distinctive customs and practices, and which they have clearly made significant effort to preserve despite the rising expenses, time commitments, and

Fig. 2.15. Sardar family courtyard, facing the Durga Dalan for Durga Puja, Hatibagan, Kolkata

Fig. 2.16. Kanthas hanging on clotheslines in the afternoon along with other washed clothes that were drying in the sun, Sardar family rooftop







Fig. 2.17 Kanthas hanging on a clothesline in a domestic courtyard, Bishnupur



Fig. 2.18 Kanthas hanging on clotheslines, below on the roadside, against the wall of a domestic compound, and above on the rooftop, Bishnupur

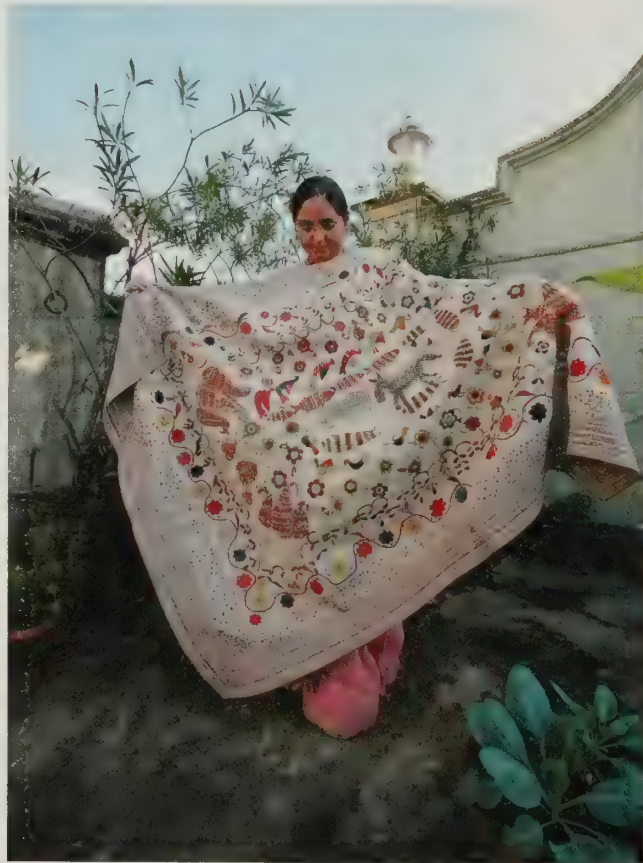


Fig. 2.19 Samadrita Sardar displays Sumatibala's kantha for me to photograph

internal negotiations among various members that such a complex production necessitates.<sup>49</sup>

The shared family identity and pride in these heirloom kanthas also became clear to me in their concerted efforts to fight against the high humidity, mold, and insects such as silverfish that destroy such textiles. They explained how the blankets are taken out and sunned to remove the musty smell that gathers during the year in storage. This is done right after the monsoon rains, when the air is dry and crisp, for use in the early fall nights, before the heavier blankets are required for the winter months. At the end of the season, the thin, white protective covers are washed and the kanthas are themselves sunned once again and put away. Jayanta Sardar informed me that they used dried tobacco leaves and *kalo jira* (often identified as black onion seeds) to preserve Sumati-



bala's kanthas.<sup>50</sup> Others such as Samadrita said they simply put everyday-use blankets in the shelves of steel *almirahs*. This led to a discussion with her mother-in-law, Niva, about the relative effectiveness of sachets of dried red chilis and dried *neem* (margosa) leaves in keeping insects at bay. At this point I also shared some of the other practices I had observed, such as the steel trunk in Malati Das's house in Bishnupur (fig. 2.20), or the many camphor-wood chests more popular in Kolkata and cedar chests I had seen in America.

The conversation alerted me that these quotidian processes of conservation practiced in each home powerfully underscore the active engagement with their family histories, and their experience, imagination, and configuration of family identities, as do their choices in giving kanthas and the memories of such acts. The variations in such practices, even within one large joint family, also offer an opportunity to reflect upon how such norms are established and identified with the family, and the agency, particularly of the women as they navigate between the ways they bring from their mothers and those customs that are learned in the in-law home, as well as the challenges experienced and the new combinations created in these processes.

My initial impression of the ceremonial context of the Durga Puja taking place in the courtyard of the domestic compound of the Sardar family, through which we wound our way to the rooftop activities and conversations about kanthas, was one of contrast (fig. 2.21). The former seemed more overtly concerned with adhering to established notions of propriety and auspiciousness, and making a public statement about the family's identity. The latter was infused with the intimacy of incomplete sentences and half-thoughts that were left to the listener to fill in, open-ended gestures, some of which I easily identified with as members of a shared culture, but others of which seemed more ambiguous or open to interpretation. Some of the family members were snatching the highlights of a cricket match, snuggled under a kantha, while others of us were finishing lunch. The kids were romping around, weaving their way between the kanthas hanging on the rooftop as they played (figs. 2.22, 2.23). All this was taking place

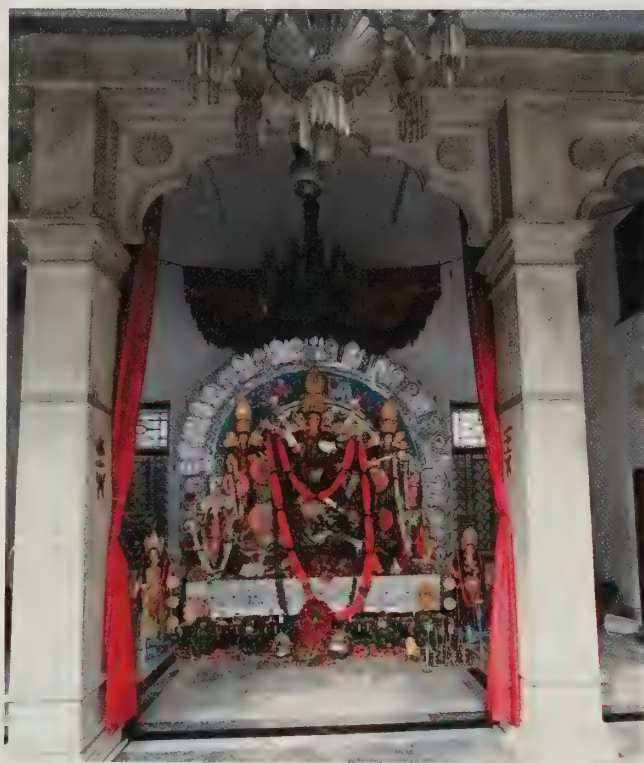


Fig. 2.20. Gangadhar Das opens the steel trunk in which the family stores Malati's kanthas

between the morning rites of the ninth day of Durga Puja, a time of rest and relaxation before the evening *arati* performance. While I had originally sought to locate kanthas in the context of such *pujas*, as many in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection depicted the deities and celebrations, the Sardar family pointed out that I had been so fortunate to arrive at the right time—when kanthas were out, and in use, before the heavier *lep* (cotton-filled blankets) were taken out for the winter, and the kanthas were sunned one last time and put away for another year. By the end of the day, the Durga Puja provided me invaluable comparison of the two sets of activities taking place in different locations within the household. Their analogousness reinforced the value of the kanthas, expressed in the more mundane activities of preserving, and the reminiscences about them, as constituent elements creating family lore and history as actively as the Durga Puja rituals, which are perhaps more readily recognized as expressions of family, community, and Bengali identity in their enactment and the particularities.<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 2.21. Durga Mahishamar-dini in worship during Durga Puja Sardar family residence, Hatibagan, Kolkata



On the flight back from West Bengal, as I mulled over my mother's gesture, and with it my glimpses into other lived experiences and memories, I began to comprehend how powerfully kanthas bring individuals together, binding families, neighbors, friends, and communities, often across generations, known and also not known to each other. In sifting through the conversations I had recorded, I see how the threads tie people together through events as well as ordinary acts of daily living, through reminiscences and imagined links between the living and those who have passed on, sometimes even if they do not seem explicably connected. In returning to the outstanding textiles in the Museum's collection with this new sense of awe and appreciation, I wonder if these kanthas may have held similar meaning and memories that were dissociated when the works were removed from that social fabric. Did these blankets receive the care that women lavish upon such kanthas? Were they sunned on rooftop clotheslines each autumn, slipped into covers when used, and then tucked away with tobacco leaves to hibernate for a year? Did families snuggle under them on chilly afternoons to rest

between the events of Durga Puja? Did some of the more spectacular kanthas store memories of ancestors to whom families traced their genealogies? Did they serve as tangible threads to imagine elusive pasts?

What if a shawl such as the one in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 59) depicting a couple framed by the auspicious and ubiquitous fish, butterfly, and betel cutter (*janti*) and two smaller figures, presumably children, were made by a mother to give to her daughter or son-in-law for the occasion of their wedding, as in the case of the kantha made by Anima Nag Chaudhuri for her daughter? Would the motifs, together with her labor of love and her very touch, have transmitted her hopes and blessings, and affirmed the familiar social values of marriage, family, and domesticity? Might the maker have had concerns about giving equally among her children, or other considerations of reciprocity and social propriety? Did a daughter cherish this kantha as the embodiment of her mother's embrace while sitting in front of the marriage fire as she prepared to leave her natal home and negotiate her loyalties with her in-laws?

Another quilt in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 53) displays the accoutrements of women's everyday lives,<sup>52</sup> including combs, *kajal lata* (receptacle for the traditional soot-based eyeliner), *janti*, and handheld fan (*hath pakha*).<sup>53</sup> The large fan, with its prominent decorated blade and ruffle held by a small figure, the paired fish, and the triangular form, likely *shri*,<sup>54</sup> are also associated with weddings.<sup>55</sup> Was this blanket displayed in creative shapes by the hands of her aunts, and sent as part of a bride's trousseau to her in-laws' home, along with the articles that are depicted on it? If a recipient spread it on her bed, would the bedspread have triggered memories of a mother's kantha-making or her everyday act of bed making, as Bulbul remembers and associates her baby kantha with her mother, grandmother, and maternal home? Perhaps the bride had helped make the bed with her mother, learning the domestic skill with intertwining hands as I had with my grandmother?

Is it possible that depicted arrays of transportation modes, including chariots (*rathas*), palanquins (*palkis*), boats, horses, and trains puffing smoke (fig. 2.24), not only offer us a view into a colonial world





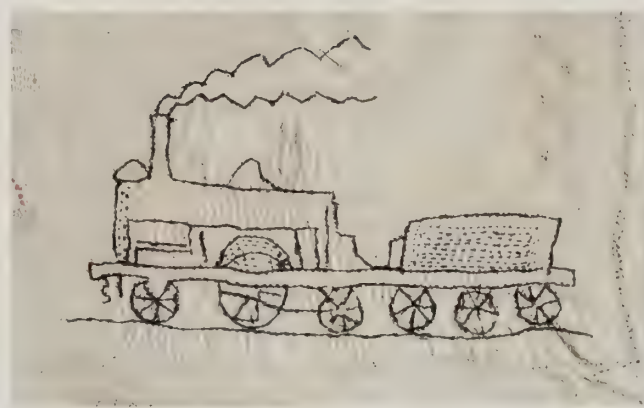
Fig. 2.22. Subroto Sardar with his daughter Swastika and nephew Spandan snuggle under a kantha blanket while watching a televised cricket match between Durga Puja rituals



Fig. 2.23. Samadrita Sardar folds kantha blankets, cleaning up as the family prepares to go downstairs for *arati*

where railroad tracks were crisscrossing the countryside parallel to the older riverine networks across the deltaic plain, but also embody individual experiences or memories of negotiating changing worlds? While the choice to display such motifs on a kantha is undoubtedly based on the kantha maker's available repertoire of motifs, the drawing skills, and familiarity with the combination of stitches required to embroider the motif, when lavished with the diligence and dexterity that such fine embroidery requires, often taking more than a year, might they also have meant something personally to the needleworker? Could they be reminiscences of journeys women undertook, even momentous ones like Sagar took from her Khulna village, where palanquins and boats still flourished in the 1960s, to Kolkata, where locomotives and automobiles had come to prevail by then?

The kantha that has perhaps made me most aware of my own shifting interest in the material is a personal favorite in the Stella Kramrisch Collection (see plate 1 and Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," this volume). When I first became acquainted with it, over a dozen years ago, as a graduate student writing a dissertation on Bengali Krishna temples, I responded to the display of the four scenes from Krishna's life because they also occur on temples from the seventeenth century onward. While work-



ing on an installation celebrating Stella Kramrisch's bequest,<sup>56</sup> I spent much time collecting narrations of such specific episodes from Krishna's biography in multiple media. *Naukavilas*, the boatripe scene, an amorous encounter between Krishna and his beloved Radha, for example, occurs on palm-leaf manuscript



covers, long painted hand scrolls (*patas*), Kalighat paintings (single-scene depictions), and Battala woodcuts, as well as in a host of verbal media. On this kantha, the blue-skinned Krishna is rowing the cowherd women of his hometown Vrindavan across the river Jamuna to sell their dairy goods at the market, with the single-minded intent to isolate Radha, who is enframed in the pavilion, and seduce her. Radha's frame of mind, when she acquiesces, is explored variously in the numerous surviving versions of this narrative, and it is likely that the embroiderer was acquainted with some of them.<sup>57</sup> Today, however, my queries have shifted from renditions of a familiar iconographic theme. I find myself asking if such a kantha, possibly made to spread on the floor and place an infant on, was displayed and sent from one home to another for a baby's *annaprasana* trousseau.<sup>58</sup> Recognizing the extraordinary delicacy of the embroidery, did a mother touch her baby's bottom on it as tentatively as Tutu had, hoping to save it from everyday wear? The lushness of the vegetal imagery not only evokes the green groves of Vrindavan where Krishna played on the riverbank, but also prompts me to ask if a mother-in-law perhaps lavished her skills and love on the kantha on rainy afternoons as she watched a grandchild growing in her daughter-in-law's belly?<sup>59</sup> Might she have engaged a young girl to separate threads for her or to hold down the layers of cloth as she secured them, thereby drawing three generations together to prepare for the new arrival? Did a grandmother set an infant down on it, and glancing at the image of the baby Krishna, tell the beloved tale to her grandchild?<sup>60</sup>

In such acts of giving, use of, and caring for kanthas an abundance of complex interactions and emotional ties is heaped upon the thrift and resourcefulness of making new, usable articles out of worn cloth that Stella Kramrisch had long recognized and lauded. The rich potential for kanthas as a vital store of social meaning explored through the lived experiences and reminiscences of women in West Bengal today can thus be extended, with some caution, to the earlier works celebrated in this catalogue and exhibition, embraced in equivalent attentiveness and care, both in storage and in the luminous glow of exhibition display that also transforms them as works of art.

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments:* A Research and Study Leave from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill gave me time to accomplish the work in India, and a Humanities and Fine Arts Award allowed for the travel. My colleagues Pallabi Chakravorty, Leela Prasad, and Dorothy Verkerk have patiently heard and read many incarnations of this essay from its inception. I thank Pallabi and Leela for their advice throughout the writing process, which both intensified and alleviated my search for balance in narrative voice and ethical stance, as well as my effort to acknowledge the vibrancy of the accounts, the humanity of the people who shared them, and the complexities of my own subjective position in gaining, interpreting, and reframing insights. Attuned to the nuances of our shared middle-class Bengali experiences, Pallabi has equally impacted my conceptualization of the material through many conversations. Lyneise Williams generously offered material from African American quilting practices, and Glaire Anderson from the elite world of Islamic Spain, which helped me to think comparatively. Above all, I want to acknowledge the generosity of the many women in West Bengal, both those acknowledged by name in the notes and also many unnamed who opened their doors and lives for this project with much warmth, graciousness, and trust. These opportunities would also not have been available without the people who introduced some of them to me, including Samit Das, Subroto Sardar, Gangadhar Das, Purabi Basu, and Aditi Basu. It was a rare pleasure to think about my own location and personal relationships, to renew ties with my family and friends, and to make new connections.

1. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 66.
2. While the role of kanthas in tangibly shaping Bengali cultural identity seems undisputed today, the everyday and occasional acts of giving and caring for family kanthas are hardly afforded corresponding scholarly recognition.
3. The association of thrift with auspiciousness and virtue is discernible in many Bengali Hindu contexts. It inheres in other aspects of domestic life, such as the identification of rice, the region's most important agricultural product, with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and grace, so that wasting rice, either when cleaning the grains or eating a meal, is regarded as inauspicious (*alokkhi*) and offensive to the goddess. The creative transformation of potato and other vegetable peels, as well as cauliflower stems, into tasty dishes also gives expression to this value.
4. All the conversations cited in this essay date to this time unless otherwise noted.
5. On the interpretation of bestowal of fabrics as acts of power, see Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).



6. Together, the essays collected in Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), interrogate the complex relationships between women's everyday lives, ritual practices, and the domestic arena in the South Asian context.

7. These are Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Bhai Phota, and Rash.

8. The former was at the Basu family ancestral home at Memari, Bardhaman District, and the latter at the Sardar family home in Hatibagan, North Calcutta, and the Ray family estate at Dasghara, Hooghly District.

9. Such changes in the use of kanthas go hand in hand with many other changes in the making of kanthas that prompt us to ask what a kantha is. When I asked Malati Das of Hazrapara, Bishnupur, to show me some of the kanthas she had made, she pulled out a pile of square *ashans* (seating mats) made from recycled jute and woven plastic sacks, bearing brightly colored cross-stitch embroidery done in wool, along with the cotton cloth embroideries that I associate with the term *kantha* (see fig. 2.5). Like her, Sima Pal, the daughter-in-law of the caretaker of the Basu family estate at Memari, also laid out seating mats made from newer material alongside the more traditional cotton ones, suggesting that the function, and the act of recycling, rather than the material or stitch, seemed to be the defining criteria (see fig. 2.2). When I met Anima Nag Chaudhuri, she was repairing a silk kantha, another fabric that I had not previously associated with kanthas. It was embroidered with the familiar characters of the well-known children's tale, "Tuntunir Galpo," which she recounted while pointing to the figures. She was engrossed in filling in the background with a layer of close, small, running stitches in order to bind the silk as the fabric was very frail and the threads were splitting. I noted that the running stitches, which are usually used to secure layers of cotton cloth, were also used as a repair technique. She explained that because the original silk was not as thickly layered, and the fabric itself was so rich and beautiful, it had not required the dense layer of running stitches at the time of its making. Likewise, the introduction of new motifs, from Donald Duck to Humpty Dumpty, Cinderella to Goldilocks, was striking in the many baby kanthas I encountered. Such individual choices offer us the opportunity to appreciate the fluidity inherent in domestic and vernacular practices. As Michael W. Meister reminds us: "The strength of vernacular is that it can always be modern"; "Vernacular Architecture and the Rhetoric of Re-Making," in *Traditional and Vernacular Architecture: Proceedings of the Seminar 6-12 January, 2001, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, India* (Chennai: Madras Craft Foundation, 2003), p. 14. As kanthas have become fashionable, distributed through boutiques and emporia not only in Kolkata and Dhaka, but worldwide, the familiar stitch is employed on an

intriguing range of fabric articles from pillow covers, handbags, and lipstick cases to wedding invitation cards. Such marked change, as kanthas leave and re-enter the domestic realm in new forms, attain higher status and a more public profile, has prompted scholars to establish a distinction between "traditional kanthas" and the "new kantha revival." See, for example, Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, 2d ed. (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1993). Such rhetorical acts remember and reuse an established tradition, itself imparting nuance or definition to what came before.

10. For a description of festive meals, see Chitrita Banerji, *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2001), p. 3.

11. In particular, those who had played a significant part in my study of home worship practices for the 1995 exhibition *Cooking for the Gods*, and had the opportunity to see their perspectives and photographs of themselves and their homes in the accompanying catalog, Michael W. Meister, ed., *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

12. I have found useful James Clifford's reflections on ethnography as fieldwork and his reconceptualization of the ethnographic process as travel. See Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 96-116. Scholars such as David Scott have noted how the ethnographic project of field travel, with its recursive movement between departure and return, has been so deeply and insidiously intertwined historically with Western expansion that "not only enabled, facilitated and authorized the specific anthropological problematic of difference . . . but also established its epistemological standpoint." See Scott, "Locating the Anthropological Subject: Post-Colonial Anthropologists in Other Places," *Inscriptions* 5 (1989). Others such as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have asserted that the field is everywhere. See Gupta and Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992), pp. 6-23; see also Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (February 1988), pp. 16-20. Kamala Visweswaran offered the term "homework" rather than fieldwork, with its emphasis on habitation and dwelling to refine Clifford's deployment of the term "dwelling" as verb rather than noun. She points to the need "to speak from the place one is located, to specify our sites of enunciation as 'home.'" See Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 101-4. Yet others have voiced the loss, estrangement, safety, and danger that mediate between home and field, including Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 2.



13. Such encounters are of course inevitably tinged with loss as well. I am deeply aware that I return to a home that is no longer the one I left. Salman Rushdie's essay collection *Imaginary Homelands* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991), which I read during my first year of college, may have been my first encounter with the articulation of such experiences.

14. Yet in some of the particularly personal conversations I also sensed some mutual recognition of our different awareness as well. Among the many scholars who have pointed to the shifting identifications of researchers that I have found useful in contemplating my own experiences are: Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 93 (1995), pp. 671-86; Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), pp. 191-210; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology*, pp. 137-62; James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992), pp. 6-23; E. Valentine Daniels, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984); Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); and Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2008).

15. A woman whom I addressed as *mashi* (mother's sister) at first meeting, because that is the usual way to address a friend's mother, by the end of my stay became someone I could comfortably drop in on or call to see if she was doing well.

16. Banerji, *Hour of the Goddess*, pp. 44-66, explores a similar range of differentiations in the contemporary food cultures of the drier west and the *bhati* (floodplain) to the east.

17. Kanthas often bear embroidered phrases to such effect. A *sujni* kantha in the Gurusaday Dutt collection, for example, displays the line *Amay jeno bhulo na* (do not forget me); Asis Chakrabarti, *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (Calcutta: Arts India Publications, 2000), plate 18; and Sila Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), p. 143, plate 181. Rahima Khatun, presumably the maker of this kantha, identifies the entreaty as hers. Although we may never know to whom and in what context this appeal was made, her cryptic message remains enigmatically powerful. Another kantha bears the rhyme *Swarga theke jyotsna meghe ke elo go hashi, Dekhe tomay pran juralo sneho nire bhashi* (Who arrived smiling from the moonlit clouds of heaven? Seeing you, flowing tears of love satiate the soul), signed Baro Ma (elder mother), likely an aunt (*jethi*) of the baby for whom this kantha was made; Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha*, p. 143, plate 182. A third example of connectedness is displayed in a woman's

embroidered assertions, *Gaya, Kashi, Brindaban, Shakali Ashar Ramani Jibane, Shudhu Shami Pada Shar* (more than Gaya, Kashi and Vrindavan [three of the most hallowed Hindu pilgrimage sites], her husband's feet is a young woman's rightful place); *ibid.*, p. 142, plate 180.

18. Conversations with Chandrabali Basu, Houston, January 4-7, 2006.

19. When I shared this material with my colleague Dorothy Verkerk she responded with a similar story about pillowcases that her mother had embroidered for her. When her daughter Amelia puts her head down on that pillowcase every night as Dorothy puts her to bed, she feels that it creates a continuity with a grandmother whose touch is retained through her handiwork, even after her death. Personal communication, April 14, 2008.

20. She studied motifs in older kanthas, including those in the Gurusaday Museum and also from books, and incorporated them into her work. She also experimented with innovative stitches, themes, and articles. This commitment and enterprise helped provide her supplementary income in later years, after the death of her husband, when she began to receive orders from both individuals and organizations.

21. Personal communication, February 15, 2008.

22. E. M. Milford, *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt: A Tale of Two Indian Villages. Translated from the Bengali Poem Nakshi Kanthar Math of Jasimuddin* (London and Calcutta: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1939).

23. On the inscription of narrative pictorial textiles depicting stories and daily activities in the traditional Hmong cultural context, see Sally Peterson, "Translating Experience and the Reading of a Story Cloth," *Journal of American Folklore* 101, no. 399 (January-March 1988), pp. 6-22.

24. On the production of locality, and on its inscription onto bodies through ceremonies, see Arjun Appadurai's discussion in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), chap. 9.

25. For descriptions and stories surrounding vows performed by women invoking Shashthi's blessings and protection for childbirth, pregnancy, and infertility, see Sila Basak, *Women's Brata Rituals* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006); and June McDaniel, *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

26. On sensory experiences as defining the body, I have found particularly useful Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

27. See, for example, the Pala-period *Lalita* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1956-75-15) and the Eternal Shiva (Sadashiva; University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology), which attest to their prior lives as objects of worship.



28. On Bengali wedding rituals, see Lina Fruzzetti's detailed and thoughtful study, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982). See also Ghosh, "Household Rituals and Women's Domains," in *Cooking for the Gods*, pp. 21–25.

29. In the last twenty-five years or so, as kanthas have attained high fashion status, this shawl often may be one that is commissioned rather than made by the bride's family members.

30. At the end of this ceremony, the formal conference of the bride is understood to have taken place.

31. Stella Kramrisch has also pointed to this: "Clothes being worn near the body are part of its ambience and are personal." However, she explores different implications when she notes: "Should an enemy get hold of any bit of cloth he might practice black magic against the former wearer. The patchwork quilt, a collection of tatters, guarantees immunity from black magic, protection and security, as do even the rags themselves when offered to the gods." Kramrisch, *Unknown India*, p. 67.

32. I thank Cynthia Packert for reminding me of the practice of giving jewelry and flowers to deities, which are then returned to the patron. See her forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Material Boy: The Art of Loving Krishna*.

33. I am grateful to my student Katherine Guinness for bringing this to my attention during my graduate seminar on performance traditions and artistic practice in South Asia, fall 2007. I am also grateful to Cynthia Packert for our conversations during April 2007 on dressing and ornamenting deity icons in Vrindavan.

34. Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image*, 3d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Lawrence A. Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1981), pp. 387–401.

35. The receipt of imperial Mughal robes from the capital could be a highly emotional experience. As Stewart Gordon has pointed out, such ceremonies are particularly significant in the Mughal context, where the elite were separated from their landed estates by service in distant areas. See Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003). I thank Allison Busch for this reference. See also Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 165–210. As others did with robes, David Curley has examined the transformations in the practice of royal gifts of *pan*. It was believed to change the body of the recipient, leaving a trace of the ruler's body to the subject's. When given from the ruler's mouth into the subject's mouth, such gifts constituted the recipient as inferior but as endowed with the virtues and authority of the ruler. David L. Curley, "Voluntary Gifts and

Royal Gifts of Pan in Mughal Bengal," in *Robes of Honour*, pp. 50–79. In a more intimate context, C. Nadia Seremetakis tells of the Greek grandmother who feeds the baby by chewing bread until it becomes a paste and then taking it from her mouth and putting it into that of the baby; "Memory of the Senses, Part II: Still Acts," in *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, ed. C. Nadia Seremetakis (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 23–45.

36. As Drew Leder has alerted us, we take our bodies for granted, so that the body tends to disappear from our awareness when functioning without problems. It is only when the smooth functioning that we assume is altered that it grabs our attention: "We then experience the body as the very absence of a desired or ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self." Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 4. I thank Pallabi Chakravorty for guiding my reading on issues of embodiment.

37. For an analogous experience of multiple generations engaging in domestic productions, see Vijaya Nagarajan's discussion of her training and experience in making threshold drawings (*kolam*) with her mother and grandmother, "Hosting the Divine: The Kolam in Tamilnadu," in *Mud, Mirror and Thread Folk Traditions of Rural India*, ed. Nora Fischer (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishers; Middletown, NJ: Grantha Corp.; Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1993), pp. 192–203.

38. Several of the women with whom I spoke indicated that in their experience, an individual kantha was typically embroidered by one person. Sagar pointed out that the dense running stitches typically done in white thread to fill the body of the kantha would become uneven if multiple hands were involved. She did, however, qualify that in her experience the more elaborate motifs were often drawn by people more skilled at drawing before the embroidery was performed by a single needleworker. She also recalled how girls and young women would often gather in one courtyard in her village to share tales and gossip while they each worked on their kanthas. In this way a temporary, female communal space was established during the afternoons. Sagar also recollected how as a young girl she went with a small pillow cover (*balisher owar*) from house to house, to pick up new stitches and motifs from friends and neighbors in the village.

39. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 72. In discussing the performance of such bodily practices, Connerton suggests that they involve "habit, and habit cannot be thought without the notion of a bodily automatism" (p. 5).

40. Anima Nag Chaudhuri's kantha making served as a model for her daughter. "Shelai [stitching] is part of the family culture," she reflected. Upon first arriving in Los Angeles from Kolkata, before settling into a career, she recalls making a kantha for a friend in New York who was having a baby. As



she put it, "I had time on my hands, and it's something we do." Along with the continuities, the potential for change is particularly visible here. Personal communication from Pal-labi Chakravorty, March 2008.

41. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962). See also Thomas Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

42. A kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 62) also inscribes this invocation to Krishna/Vishnu across a *ratha* (chariot) bearing Jagannatha, Balarama, and Subhadra, the triad of deities celebrated at the famous temple at Puri, Orissa. These icons are taken out of their temple for a chariot ride on the occasion of the annual festival of Ratha, which is also replicated throughout Bengal each year. See Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, eds., *The Cult of Jagannatha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (Delhi: Manohar, 1978). On this kantha, Jagannatha is thereby incorporated in the list of the stitched names of god along with Krishna, Hari, and Rama, a layering familiar in Bengal at least since the sixteenth century, when the Bengali saint Chaitanya, believed by many to be an incarnation of Krishna, dedicated himself to Jagannatha at Puri.

43. The repeated prayers on this kantha are reminiscent of *namaboli* (cotton shawls worn by Brahman priests), which are often saffron colored with red printed words, but may also be white with black words.

44. Krishna's name was believed to be so powerful that simply uttering it would ensure salvation for the devotee; see Norvin J. Hein, "Caitanya's Ecstasies and the Theology of the Name," in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 15–32. This belief resonates with another kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 9) in the embroidered reminder *Hari nam n[i]tya shangshar anitya* (only the name of god is eternal and lasting [*samsara*], the world as we know it, is fleeting [*maya*]). (This line could also be translated: "While the names of god are available all the time, the stability experienced in one's household is precarious.")

45. I noticed that when women who engage in the practice of making kanthas gathered to show me their handiwork, they would comment on the choices of stitch, color, motifs, and compositional devices and arrangements on each article. They seemed to be responding to new techniques, motifs, patterns, and compositions to add to or modify their individual repertoire.

46. Kirin Narayan, for example, has observed that among upper-caste women in the Kangra region of the Himalayan foothills, family honor overrode other criteria to preserve silence on matters of domestic discord, while "smaller-caste" women honored themselves in telling their life stories and

wanted these disclosed for a larger audience. See Narayan, "Honor Is Honor after All': Silence and Speech in the Life Stories of Women in Kangra, Northwest India," in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 227–51. Kamala Visweswaran's research led her to explore women's silences and absences as resistance and political maneuverings in women's silences in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, chap. 3. Like Narayan, she also notes the convergences between issues of class and silence.

47. Leela Prasad, for example, has reflected that stories shared with her were used to "allege incompetence, 'excessive' attachment to the maternal family's sampradaya, or to fabricate one family's superiority over another"; Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 127–28.

48. For a discussion of the major rituals comprising Durga Puja, see Akos Ostor's study based in Bishnupur, West Bengal, *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure, and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 33–97. On Durga Puja in Calcutta, see Chaliha Gupta, Jaya Gupta, and Bunny Gupta, "Durga Puja in Calcutta," in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 2: *The Present and the Future*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 330–36. On Durga Puja in nineteenth-century Calcutta, see Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).

49. Several kanthas in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection depict the performance of Durga Puja. A kantha from the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 9), for example, depicts the traditional *chalchitra* frame with the goddess in her martial Mahishamardini form, trampling the demon underfoot, flanked by her four children, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Karttikeya, and Saraswati. Above Durga is a figure of her husband Shiva, with his five heads and light skin, perhaps reflecting the popular belief that she cannot be worshiped without his presence, even if the festival is a celebration of her return to her natal home. A kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 73) depicts the performance of such a goddess *puja* in a domestic compound. The deity is framed between columns of a *dalan* temple, and the priest raises a flywhisk during the performance of *arati* while the family gathers around, men on one side, women on the other. The presence of musicians might also suggest the performances associated with the elaboration and competition among the elite houses of nineteenth-century North Calcutta in sponsoring elaborate *pujas*.

50. On the uses of *neem* and *kalo jira*, see Banerji, *The Hour of the Goddess*, pp. 35, 67–68.

51. Leela Prasad's recent observation on canonicity alerts us that "cultural consciousness about appropriate conduct . . . is



seen not only in grand gestures of hospitality or ritual performance but also in acts of everyday life"; Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, p. 11. That the authority of the canonical is itself plural, embodied in particular relationships, and continually reinterpreted also urges us to reconfigure the ways in which kanthas have been classified. It is also useful to recall A. K. Ramanujan's reminder that the folk and classical are "coexistent and available (in varying degrees) to everyone, as codes switched by rules of context like speech varieties in a speaker's repertoire." Stuart Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan, eds., *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 19–20. My student Klint Ericson has also explored some of the issues surrounding canonicity in scholarly literature on kanthas in his term paper "Back to Kantha: Scholarship, the Kantha Revival and Canonical Marginality," for my spring 2008 graduate seminar on Women, Art and Ritual in South Asia.

52. For a more comprehensive discussion of these articles, see Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha*; Sila Basak, *Women's Brata Rituals* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006); Tapanmohan Chatterji, *Alpona: Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1948); and Abanindranath Tagore, *Banglar Brata* (Calcutta, 1919). The combinations of household articles are often clustered to depict specific performances. A *sujni* kantha from South Twenty-four Parganas, for example, depicts a combination of domestic implements that are explicitly associated with the *arandhan brata* (vow not to cook) observed on the first day of the monsoon rains. See Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha*, p. 115, plate 135.

53. This last article may have a self-referential quality as the decorative motifs suggest the kantha embroidery used to adorn handheld palm-leaf fans (*hath pakhar jhalor*).

54. A conical mound comprised of decorated, colored rice paste, the *shri* is used for various wedding rituals including *baran*, the ritual welcome given to a groom by his mother-in-law upon his arrival at the bride's home.

55. I thank Sagarmoni Sarkar for her recollections about fans, which alerted me to the significance of the one depicted here.

She reminisced about her elder sister-in-law's (*boro ja*) specialty in making fan accoutrements for weddings to accompany wedding *palki* (palanquin), particularly for bringing the groom to the bride's home for the ceremony. (For a depiction of two palanquins in procession, accompanied by musicians, see plate 61).

56. *Threads of Cotton, Threads of Brass*, Wood Gallery, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998–99.

57. I have discussed this at greater length in my other essay in this volume.

58. The relatively large size suggests that it was made for a bigger baby than the smaller ones typically given for the Shashti Puja. However, the Vaishnava imagery and size are also typical of a type identified as *bayton* (*bostani*) kantha by scholars such as Asis K. Chakrabarti. On the uses of such kantha articles, see Chakrabarti, *Kantha*, p. 50; see also Zaman, *Art of Kantha Embroidery*, p. 61.

59. It is a commonplace that the monsoon was the time of the year when kantha making was most practiced, when other outdoor tasks such as tending to the rice crop could not be undertaken. (The date embroidered on a kantha in the Bonovitz Collection [see plate 63] likely acknowledges that the embroiderer undertook the activity in the rainy month of Ashar.)

60. The depiction of Krishna stealing butter from his foster-mother Yashoda's churn (*nanichura*) is divided into two continuously narrative scenes with the repeated figure of the baby under one architectural frame. Under the second arch from the left is Krishna with his hands in the pot of butter, literally caught in the act by his mother, who advances with a whip to punish him. To the left, she is embracing the boy, a moment that is probably familiar to Bengali audiences as the powerful revelation of Krishna's divinity to his mother. When the boy opened his mouth, rather than finding the food he was consuming, Yashoda glimpsed the swirling universes, and realized that the boy wriggling in her arms, and who she had reprimanded thoroughly, was the absolute divine.







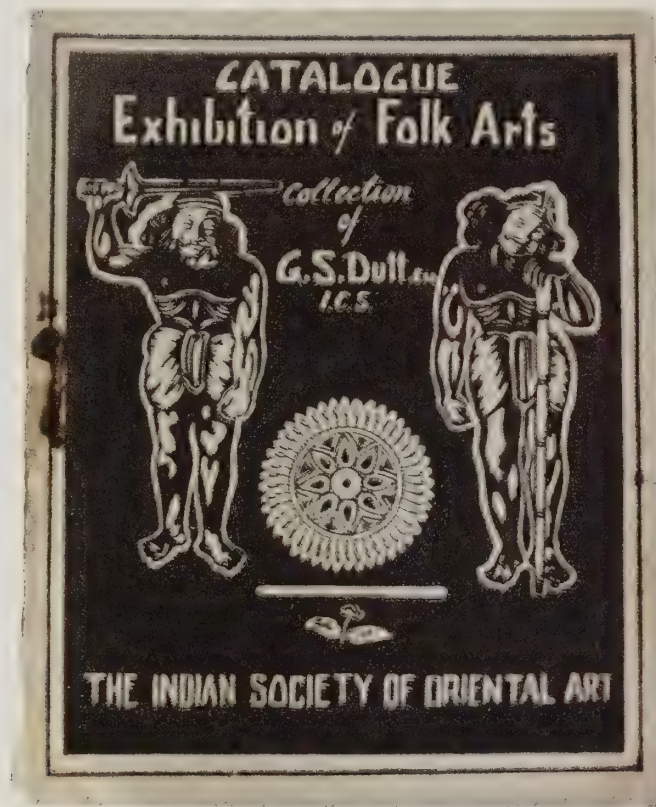
## In Search of “Living Traditions”: Gurusaday Dutt, Zainul Abedin, and the Institutional Life of Kanthas

When Stella Kramrisch started collecting kanthas in the 1920s and 1930s, some of her contemporaries in Calcutta (Kolkata) were also actively engaged in this enterprise. Kramrisch began her academic career in India at Visva-Bharati in rural Santiniketan, where she taught from 1922 to 1923 at the invitation of the great poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), founder of this remarkable experimental university. From Santiniketan Kramrisch moved to Calcutta to take up a teaching position at the University of Calcutta, a position she held for almost thirty years. As noted in a commemorative issue of Santiniketan’s art journal *Nandan* dedicated to the art historian, “Stella developed a great liking for Indian folk art. Her association with the Tagores, Dinesh Chandra Sen and Gurusaday Datta [Dutt] helped her to recognize its importance.”<sup>1</sup> These domestic textiles crafted by women were linked with a decidedly urban interest in rural traditions. Significantly, for Kramrisch’s Bengali colleagues, kanthas and folk culture became forged with a nationalist agenda.

Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941) was perhaps the exemplar of this nationalist, romantic sentiment yet, paradoxically, he has received remarkably little attention for his pioneering role in collecting and documenting folk arts as well as discursively situating this rich corpus within a larger nationalist project. His important archive of village arts represents a defining moment in the reclamation and revitalization of Bengali cultural identity. Dutt was born in Birasri, Sylhet (present-day Bangladesh), and as he would write in his later years, this village was “the only begetter” of his inspiration. For him, rural life exemplified in the village was the wellspring of Bengal’s creativity and national heritage. Dutt’s writings throughout the 1930s are deeply imbued with this greater sense of national purpose. He writes in language that could only be described as epiphanal: “As if inner eye, blinded by the superficial education of the cities . . . had at last been opened.”<sup>2</sup> Dutt spent most of his career as an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer posted throughout undivided Bengal. He



Fig. 3.1. Cover of G. S. Dutt, *Catalogue Exhibition of Folk Arts* (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1932). Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata. Photograph by Katherine Hacker



developed a keen interest in both performative and visual practices, and became a serious collector. Dutt first exhibited portions of his extraordinary collection in Calcutta in 1932 (fig. 3.1).

Zainul Abedin (1914–1976), like Dutt, collected *kanthas*, harnessed their rural production to a nationalist cause, and actively worked for recognition of these textiles as well as of crafts in an institutional setting. Whereas Dutt was from the family of a once wealthy *zamindar* (landowner) and moved through the ranks of the ICS, Abedin's background was more modest: he was a Muslim whose father was a police constable in Kishorganj, Mymensingh District (present-day Bangladesh). Abedin first trained and then taught at the Government School of Art in Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> After independence in 1947, he returned to East Pakistan where he had a pivotal role in the founding of art schools in Dacca. Moreover, Abedin rose to become a painter of international stature, thus bringing an aesthetic eye to collecting.

As we will see through a productive comparison of these two remarkable individuals, their underlying

ideologies intersected in significant ways despite different political and career trajectories. Both were products of Bengal during politically turbulent decades, and both were active participants in a cosmopolitanism that held cultural currency in Calcutta. Dutt and Abedin were exposed to European ideas in education and art, and both traveled extensively in Europe and Asia. This essay explores these two key players and different moments in this complex project of cultural nationalism. It also situates them in larger debates around the emergent nation, the place of the rural in the national imaginary, and the interlinked issues of gender and nationalism. As creative products of rural women's labor and domestic ritual, *kanthas* also afford us a unique opportunity to examine how the ideal and idealization of "womanhood" constructed at this time cast women as the repositories of tradition.

### The Language, Practice, and Politics of "Tradition"

In Dutt's empowering discourse, *kanthas* are emblematic of how cultural practice endures and is to be valued. Although he argued for a deep continuity with the past, he also insisted upon a rupture and discontinuity with the urban present. We can certainly recognize in his formulation the now familiar and well-rehearsed dichotomy of tradition and modernity, a false opposition that positions "tradition" as unchanging in contrast with "modernity" as exemplifying progress, innovation, and change. Yet by situating these ideas within Indian nationalist self-assertion of the early twentieth century, Dutt makes tradition into an ideal and strategic foil to a modernity deeply entangled with perceptions of the social ills, indeed a moral crisis, visited on India during colonial rule. As Dutt's projects became more overtly political, his stress on constant and familiar imagery, seemingly a conservative framework, is in fact a crucial component in his representation of *kanthas* and other aspects of folk culture within a nationalist ideology. Rather than dismiss Dutt's work as participating in the problematic binary of tradition and modernity, we might more productively speak of this deliberate positioning as strategic essen-



tialism. Historian Partha Chatterjee's important work on the mediating figure of the Bengali *bhadralok* ("respectable folk," the middle class) calls attention to how this seemingly contradictory marriage of conservatism and anti-colonial and political reform emerges at this particular moment.<sup>4</sup> What then constitutes Dutt's "living traditions"?

In an early essay titled "The Living Traditions of the Folk Arts in Bengal," Dutt emphatically argues that folk arts of Bengal—"cottage" architecture, wooden sculpture, decorative floor and mural designs, decorative and figurative terra-cotta, scroll paintings, and embroidery—"really constitute the distinctive *national art* [Dutt's emphasis] of the Bengali people."<sup>5</sup> This polemical interpretation runs consistently throughout his considerable scholarship. Dutt posits that rural art of Bengal illustrates the "essential character of art in ancient and medieval India . . . on the one hand; while on the other, it was a spontaneous expression and inseparable part of the life of the people. There was thus no duality between life and art. This feature of the art of Bengal still survives in the living traditions of the people's arts in her villages."<sup>6</sup> In Dutt's valorization of *kantha*, he argues persuasively to shift the discourse away from the urban context: "the art of the neo-Bengal urban artists is not the real national art-vernacular of Bengal."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Dutt's intervention placed him in conflict with art reformer Ernest Binfield Havell, principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta until 1906, and also with the artist Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore's most gifted student and, from 1919 to 1951, head of Kala Bhavan, the art school at Santiniketan. Samik Bandyopadhyay's insightful introduction to Dutt's collected papers, published posthumously in 1990, underscores the fundamental points of difference in the Dutt-Bose debate: "While Bose's insistence on the supremacy of the scientific embodies the typical post-enlightenment ideology, Dutt's nationalist discourse draws on the politics of the time and offers a cultural rationale for national self determination."<sup>8</sup> The great Indian art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy's own eloquent defense of tradition, published earlier in *Essays in National Idealism* (1909), positions tradition as "a mother-tongue": "a wonderful, expressive language that enables the artist working through it to speak

directly to the heart without the necessity for explanation."<sup>9</sup> Often described as a transcendentalist, Coomaraswamy advanced the essentially spiritual nature of Indian art and heralded the *shilpin* (craftsperson) as symbol of India's cultural renaissance. Thus, the spiritual is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" markers of cultural identity. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, "The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture."<sup>10</sup> Unlike nationalist projects in other parts of the world, this paradigm represents a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalism in Asia. In early twentieth-century Bengal, race theories commanded currency during the rise and articulation of the nation-state. Historian Peter Robb writes: "Folk qualities and identities were regarded as primordial—that is, original but still extant—and purity of inheritance came to be important. Gradually, the word 'Indian' came to imply 'race' even before it clearly meant 'nation.'"<sup>11</sup> Throughout his writings, Dutt envisioned art as a kind of "race-language," "a language or form of self-expression of the race spirit";<sup>12</sup> in other words, culture.

### Gurusaday Dutt, the Cultural Project of Indigeneity, and the Politics of Locality

As the first young man from his village to pass a university entrance examination, Dutt came to Calcutta in 1898 to study at Presidency College, where he graduated first in his class. The Sylhet (Dutt's home district) Association raised the considerable sum of money required to send him to England, where he studied law at Cambridge University and passed the exceptionally difficult exams necessary to qualify him for the ICS. Dutt returned to India in 1905, the tumultuous year of the first partition of Bengal and a period of heightened anticolonial nationalism indelibly marked by the Swadeshi Movement (1905–8). Rabindranath Tagore was most engaged during this period writing several polemical plays and patriotic songs, and his nephew Abanindranath painted the iconic *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), which was silk-screened onto banners for political rallies in Calcutta. The public protest against the partition was so widespread and intense



that the policy was revoked in 1911. Dutt served and traveled extensively throughout Bengal until his retirement from the civil service in 1940. As early as 1919, he became deeply interested in Bengali folk dance, which he saw not as an isolated art form but integrated with other performing and visual arts and thus fundamental to cultural identity. Indeed, by situating his work within a wider cultural matrix, Dutt shared with leading Bengali intellectuals such as Rabindranath, Dinesh Chandra Sen, and Aurobindo Ghosh "a perceived connection between identity and aesthetic activity in the realms of art, music, literature and language."<sup>13</sup> Sen was an eminent historian and folklorist, and as professor of Bengali literature at the University of Calcutta he promoted the work of Bengali poet Jasimuddin. *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt), Jasimuddin's 1929 poem, tells of Shaju, the beautiful young village woman, tragically separated from her husband. The epic poem imaginatively unfolds as the life stories Shaju embroiders on her kantha.

"The Art of Bengal," one of Dutt's first articles, appeared in 1931 in the *Modern Review*, an English-language monthly launched in 1907 by Ramananda Chatterjee that "quickly emerged as a vital forum for the nationalist intelligentsia."<sup>14</sup> Ramananda was interested in his nationalist message reaching a wider readership than *Prabasi*, the Bengali-language monthly he founded six years earlier. The prominent publisher's ideological platform coincided with that of Dutt's as broadly nationalist and not affiliated with a particular party. The *Modern Review* promoted current affairs, important issues like widow remarriage and conservation of natural resources, as well as leaders of cultural nationalism in Bengal and fitness culture or the physical disciplining of the body, a nationalist preoccupation. Additionally, the journal reproduced paintings in color plates, thereby shaping the visual education of the nation.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the 1930s Dutt contributed illustrated articles to the *Modern Review*: "The Tiger's God in Bengal Art" (1932), "Plastic Form in Bengal Clay" (1934), "The Mathurapur Monument" (1934), "Mask Dances of Mymensingh" (1939), "The Art of Kantha" (1939), and "Indus Civilisation Forms and Motifs in Bengali Culture" (in two parts, 1939–40). Dutt also published reg-

ularly in the prestigious *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, co-edited by Abanindranath Tagore and Stella Kramrisch, with articles on "The Indigenous Painters of Bengal" (1933), "Painted *Saras* of Rural Bengal" (1934), "Wood Carvings from a Bengal Village" (1937), and "Bengali Terra-cottas" (1938).<sup>16</sup> The following year, Kramrisch published her important article "Indian Terra-cottas," in which she articulated an "ageless types" and "timed variations" model. Kramrisch's first article on kantha made an appearance in this same issue of the journal. (See Mason, "Interwoven in the Pattern of Time," and Kramrisch, "Kanthā," both in this volume.)

The Indian Society of Oriental Art (ISOA), initially a European-sponsored institution with generous funding from the government, helped popularize exhibitions and wean the public from academic art.<sup>17</sup> The ISOA was the premiere venue for exhibitions ranging from Bauhaus works in 1922 to the last major retrospective of Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), Abanindranath's older brother, in 1928. In 1930 Calcutta painter Jamini Roy (1887–1972) held an exhibition in which he juxtaposed his own paintings with *patas* (indigenous narrative scrolls). In part, Dutt had brought these boldly painted narrative scrolls, each like "a moving picture gallery," to the attention of the urban elite with his exhibition and with articles such as "The Indigenous Painters of Bengal." As noted earlier, he also was interested in the integration of the visual and the performative. In this regard, Dutt published a collection of *patua* songs, *Patua Sangit* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1939), calling attention to how the scrolls served as visual aids to live performances. Sometimes called the father of the folk-art renaissance in India, Jamini Roy made his own pilgrimage back to the village where he not only collected *patas* but also worked with the painters, enabling him to construct an alternative vision of Indian modernity.<sup>18</sup> His incorporation of the bold simplicity of line and vigorous form in the *patas* redefined his paintings as powerfully expressive, fresh, and original. The 1930s also marked a significant institutional shift at Santiniketan with its transformation from a pan-Asian sensibility to a self-conscious embrace of the local. Against the series of exhibitions sponsored by the



ISOA and a decidedly ideological shift in policies, the stage was set for Dutt's landmark exhibition.

On March 20, 1932, an exhibition of one hundred objects from Dutt's impressive collection was mounted in Calcutta under the auspices of the ISOA (see fig. 3.1).<sup>19</sup> Two members of the illustrious Tagore family were involved: Rabindranath opened the exhibition and Abanindranath wrote the foreword for the accompanying catalogue (fig. 3.2). Abanindranath was widely regarded as the champion of a new Indian style of painting as an alternative to Western academic training; he had also analyzed *alpana* (rice-paste designs) and their ritual use.<sup>20</sup> With public validation from none other than the great poet and the accomplished painter, Dutt embarked on a campaign of public lectures and publications both in India and England that often struck a stridently nationalist tone. Even so, Dutt lamented that his lecture accompanying the exhibition, delivered to a "learned gathering of university professors and noted art critics," was not well received; moreover, his ideas were considered "heresy." Dutt directed his counterattack at Havell in particular: "Under the guidance of E. B. Havell, young Bengal has sought inspiration from the art creations of the extinct traditions of southern and western India [the fifth-century Buddhist cave site of Ajanta] . . . Neo-Bengal art is a borrowed art."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Dutt concluded his lecture with a painting demonstration (fig. 3.3). Headlining their brief review "Bengal's Folk Art Faced with Decay," the *Statesman*, Calcutta's leading English-language daily newspaper, noted that the *patua* (painters) "form an important caste in Bengal who rejoice in the classic name of Chitrakar and still remain the custodians of Bengal's traditions in art," while advancing Dutt's argument that the "upper classes have now ceased to feel any interest in this form of popular poetry and art and degeneration and decay are everywhere."<sup>22</sup> Out of the one hundred objects exhibited, fourteen were *kanthas*. With the exception of a few listing provenance only, most entries included not only the district but the name of the village as well, reminding us of the years Dutt spent in various postings across the length and breadth of Bengal. Significantly, the maker's names were also recorded. Four were made by and collected from a single woman: Manadasundari from Mulghar,



Fig. 3.2. Rabindranath Tagore (left) and Abanindranath Tagore working on a sketch for *Chitrangada*, 1892. Rabindranath asked his nephew to illustrate his play, published in 1892 and later reworked into a dance-drama, *Chitra* (1914). Courtesy of the Rabindra Bhavana Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan



Fig. 3.3. Gurusaday Dutt with painter Mataru Chitrakar working on a square *pat*. While undated, this photograph may have been taken at the demonstration following Dutt's lecture at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta, March 1932. Courtesy of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Kolkata



Khulna District (now Bangladesh), a low-lying river delta between Calcutta and Dhaka; two others from this same town were made by and collected from Indumati Devi. Yet another, a *joth* (long, narrow kantha), came from Sohagini Devi, also of Mulghar. In the village of Lohargara, Jessore District, Dutt collected two kanthas from Sarajubala Sirkar and one from Radharani Sur.

Kramrisch and Dutt both published essays on kanthas in 1939. Kramrisch's article appeared in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, while Dutt's was published in the *Modern Review*. In typically poetic prose, Kramrisch writes: "the kantha is a work that gives wholeness to things that were of no use any more, to fragments without significance. This rite of restitution of wholeness is a domestic one, performed by women, though rarely by Brahman women." She continues: "Thematically, the art of the kantha is an enriched textile version of art of the *aripona* or *alpona*, the painting on the floor, its magical purpose being enhanced by the textile symbolism of its material and the way it is used. Stylistically, its form is entirely its own, adjusting an ancient propensity of India's classical art to its own textile and planar sensibilities."<sup>23</sup> Dutt began his illustrated article by discussing kanthas as patchwork and embroidered "spectacular" quilts. "The care and artistry with which the embroideries are made and the natural genius of Bengalee women for creating simple and lovely designs in primary colors, however, transform the kanthas from their original state of patched up rags into wonderfully beautiful creations of linear and colored designs."<sup>24</sup> Establishing seven categories based on size and use—the *rumal*, small and square like a handkerchief, for example; and the *arshilata*, a rectangular wrap for household glasses, combs, and mirrors (*arshi*)—Dutt reserved his greatest praise for the comparatively large kantha for seating honored guests on ceremonial occasions. *Sujni* kanthas "represent the highest culmination of the art of Bengalee stitchcraft."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Kramrisch refers to each quilt as a kantha without differentiation, and the makers remain anonymous unless they signed their work.

While little is known of the specifics of Dutt's collecting practices in the villages of rural Bengal, they

were undeniably informed by a set of nascent ideals that coalesced into the Bratachari Movement, envisioned as a complete synthesis of life. As founder of the movement, Dutt encouraged the development and discipline of the physical body alongside the mental to foster "a national sense and national solidarity."<sup>26</sup> With its five universal *bratas* (principles or vows) of knowledge, labor, truth, unity, and joy, the movement stressed social service and labor projects directed at village reconstruction. In explaining the origin of the movement Dutt pointed to a defining moment in 1929 when he witnessed a festival of folk dances on his third visit to England. From this experience he returned "with a firm resolve to inaugurate a movement for the conservation of these precious and living traditions of the art of Indian life."<sup>27</sup> In 1930 Dutt established in Mymensingh a society for the conservation and practice of the folk dances of Bengal. Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887–1924) shared her husband's abiding commitment to social reform and as early as 1913 had founded a *mahila samiti*, an organization aimed specifically at women and health care, which grew into an extensive network of women's organizations in Bengal and the neighboring state of Bihar. Modeled, in part, on Rabindranath Tagore's and Mahatma Gandhi's rural reconstruction programs, the organization was also inspired by organizations for women in England.<sup>28</sup> The Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association, established in 1925 by Gurusaday Dutt following his wife's untimely death, was an umbrella organization for the *mahila samitis* that provided a range of vocational training, teaching various skills and crafts, including embroidery.

In the 1920s and 1930s, one sees a sharper nationalist focus on the importance of "enlightened motherhood" achieved through education and an attempt to apply this notion to poor and working-class women.<sup>29</sup> The feminist sentiment behind the *mahila samitis* is women's economic empowerment. Saroj Nalini's all too brief life and work are lovingly recounted by her husband in *A Woman of India—Being the Life of Saroj Nalini (Founder of the Women's Institute Movement of India)*, with a foreword by Rabindranath Tagore. Political activist Charles Freer Andrews, Rabindranath's associate and long-time teacher at Santiniketan, wrote the introduction. Inter-



estingly, *A Woman of India* was published in 1929 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in London, the same year as Virginia Woolf's own *A Room of One's Own*, her most famous feminist polemic. In concert with their works on socialism and education, the Woolfs shared an intense commitment to the status of women and feminist causes, reflected in eleven publications on women.<sup>30</sup>

### Exhibiting Dutt's Collection: The Gurusaday Museum

Dutt's spectacular kanthas as well as his equally impressive collections of paintings and *pats*, wood carvings, and terra-cottas are assembled in a museum bearing his name. The Gurusaday Museum formally opened in 1963 in Bratacharigram, the site on the grounds of the Bratachari Society where Dutt had anticipated creating a folk university. Dutt deliberately selected Joka, south of Calcutta, as the location for Bratacharigram because of its rural setting. The Gurusaday Museum is a modest two-storied structure with a large central hall, smaller surrounding galleries, an upper gallery, and a small library. The view from the second story provides an excellent overview of Dutt's superb collection: large free-standing glass and wooden cases contain kanthas, *pats*, Kalighat paintings and sketchbooks, and a few sketches by Jamini Roy; the side galleries are dedicated to wooden sculpture and architectural fragments, and stone sculpture (fig. 3.4). The upper level displays stone molds for sweets and mango paste, *sara* (painted terra-cotta pot covers), *kula* (winnowing fans and trays), musical instruments, toys, dolls, and a few of Dutt's personal belongings. The labels for these works, collected between 1929 and 1939, attribute them to "undivided Bengal," preserving the distinct time and politics of their collection. Bequeathed to the Bengal Bratachari Society, Dutt's original collection exceeds two thousand objects; the kantha collection alone numbers some two hundred, with approximately fifty *sujni* kanthas.<sup>31</sup>

The centerpiece of the Gurusaday Museum's display of beautiful kanthas is the large (nearly six feet high), elaborately crafted *sujni* kantha by Manadasundari (fig. 3.5).<sup>32</sup> The rectangular cloth is displayed verti-



Fig. 3.4. Interior of the Gurusaday Museum, Joka, Kolkata  
Photograph by Darielle Mason

cally in a double-sided glass case enabling the viewer to see both faces (*dorukha*) and calling attention to the incredibly fine workmanship. The embroiderer skillfully wove together a remarkably rich textile of extraordinary storytelling; moreover she incorporated a lengthy biographic inscription mentioning her father, a local *zamindar* to whom the kantha is dedicated, and her village and district, all while treating the elegant Bangla script as another design element. The inscription reads: "This *sujni* was made by Shrimati Manadasundari Dasya, by my own hands, daughter of Baradakanta Basu of Jangal Bandhal, Mulghar, Khulna. This *sujni* is given with respect for my father. Please forgive any mistakes." The inclusion of the title "Dasya" (devotee) may indicate that Manadasundari was a caste Hindu, but not a Brahman; a Brahman woman would more likely have used the term "Devi." The



Fig. 3.5. *Sujni* kantha by Manadasundari, Jangal Bandal, Mulgar, Khulna. This kantha is one of fourteen Dutt exhibited in 1932. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 1481). Photograph by Partha Sarathi Mukherjee, courtesy of Niaz Zaman



Fig. 3.6. Detail of the *sujni* kantha in fig. 3.5, showing a *babu* seated in European chair with a two-anna coin above his head. The silver currency system of sixteen annas to the rupee was introduced during the Colonial period and continued into the first decade of independence. Coins typically displayed a portrait on the obverse, with the coin's value on the reverse, as shown on this kantha. Photograph by Darielle Mason



kantha displays a vibrant red and pink multipetaled lotus (*shatadala padma*) at its center. An ideal iconographic form, the lotus or mandala is ubiquitous as a central organizational motif on kanthas. In one of his formal comparisons, Dutt argues for deep continuity: "Thus the mandala design of the kanthas, like that of *alpana* drawings to which the kantha designs are closely allied, is in all likelihood of very ancient and probably pre-Aryan origin."<sup>33</sup> We are reminded here that "reiteration is a distinguishing feature of *tradition's* power [my emphasis], building on its connections with sustaining foundations."<sup>34</sup> Radiating out from the lotus are two decorative bands, then large *kalka* in alternating colors; these paisley designs, in turn, are framed by the inscription in black thread. The outer corners contain trees and lotuses, and the various vignettes are all oriented concentrically around the lotus, the emanating center of the composition. The overall white field is profusely filled with lively and fanciful scenes of caparisoned elephants and riders, domestic scenes, *sadhus* (holy men), and small shrines arranged in distinct pictorial registers. Attention to detail is extraordinary, and patterns on clothing, fish, and fowl are clearly vehicles to display the virtuosity and originality of the embroiderer. Dutt could well have had this kantha in mind when he wrote: "Designs are remarkable for their infinite variety, originality and freshness."<sup>35</sup>

One of Dutt's many postings was in Khulna District, a low-lying delta of dense jungle and an extensive network of waterways. On Manadasundari's *sujni* kantha, the inscription refers to the village of Jangal Bandal, a location evoked by a background teeming with a large assortment of fishes, shrimp, frogs, and other aquatic life. But Khulna is also close to Calcutta, and numerous visual references to urban life, especially in the *babus* seated in European chairs, remind us of the ways in which the rural engages with the urban through the circulation of images (fig. 3.6). *Babu* was an honorific form of address for the Bengali elite, but in the nineteenth century it also gained currency as a term of derision for certain men: pleasure seekers spending their new wealth, or pampered sons their inherited wealth, on drinking and other amusements. A kantha from the Kramrisch Collection (fig. 3.7) depicts one of these dandies with his wife perched on his shoulder while leading his mother on a leash. This oft-



depicted scene is known as *Ghor Kali*, the end of the world in the apocalyptic era, or *Kali Yuga*. Kalighat painters routinely critiqued the *babu's* slavish copying of Western patterns of dress and lifestyle as well as the decline of his moral values, visually underscored by his abusive treatment of his pious mother, who wears prayer beads and religious marks on her forehead. These painters from rural Bengal settled around Calcutta's Kali Temple in the early nineteenth century, making inexpensive, popular watercolors of local events as well as of deities that were purchased by pilgrims as souvenirs of their visit. Their paintings were also incredibly popular with visitors, tourists, and traders in the growing city. Whereas Dutt sought out stylistic parallels with the ancient past in rural forms, when discussing Kalighat painting he writes that "these traditions, however, have been corrupted by town influence and their last notable representatives are dead and gone."<sup>36</sup> Yet certainly part of the vitality Dutt applauded can be attributed to the visual dexterity and multiple borrowings in evidence on Manadasundari's *kantha* and others he avidly collected.

When he died in 1941, Gurusaday Dutt's obituary appeared, fittingly, in the *Modern Review*, the journal that had so greatly contributed to his scholarly and social endeavors being able to reach a national audience. Dutt was "an able and dutiful officer and if he had not been an Indian, he might certainly have been appointed Governor of some province. He had other disqualifications, too, for which he was never made even a Chief Secretary or a Divisional Commissioner. The powers that be . . . were displeased with him for his independence, as evidenced, by his severe reprimand of the European police and military officers in connection with the Bamangachi shooting case [1926]. In and outside office, his genuine and practical sympathy for his countrymen, particularly the village folk, and his *Swadeshi* [indigenous] dress and manners outside office hours, were perhaps other offences in the eyes of the arbiters of India's destiny."<sup>37</sup> In the final analysis, however, the British were wary of him, and certainly some Bengalis misunderstood his cultural project.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Kramrisch became interested in folk arts through the efforts of Dutt, among others. They traveled in some



Fig. 3.7. Detail of plate 4 showing *Ghor Kali*

of the same elite circles in Calcutta, with common friends including the Tagores, and published in the same journals (and, in several instances, on the same material), so that we get a strong sense of the intellectual milieu, creative interactions and debates, and social issues of import. Kramrisch clearly recognized the significance of Dutt's collection and in 1968 borrowed objects—including a rectangular *kantha* from Khulna with scenes of Durga, Krishna, and Radha—from the Bengal Bratachari Society for her seminal exhibition *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.<sup>38</sup> Dutt died without seeing India achieve independence in 1947, whereas Kramrisch remained in India until 1950. They both may have known a promising young artist who came to the colonial metropolis in 1933.

### Zainul Abedin: Artist, Activist, and Collector

Perhaps best known for his sensitive portraits of the Bengal famine, Zainul Abedin (fig. 3.8) is today heralded in Bangladesh as one of its most important artists, and a gallery in the National Museum, Dhaka, is dedicated to his work. Throughout his prolific career, Abedin's focus—whether in his own art production, in the promotion of indigenous crafts, or in his politics—remained trained on the rural. Born in 1914, Abedin left





Fig. 3.8. Zainul Abedin (second from right) with renowned sarod player and music teacher Ustad Allauddin Khan (third from right), artist Kamrul Hasan, musician Ustad Khadem Hossain Khan, and author Sardar Joinuddin at a music conference at Bardhaman House, Dhaka, 1955. Now the Bangla Academy, Bardhaman House was the site of protest and agitation for the recognition of Bangla as a state language. Photograph by Rafiqul Islam

Kishorganj, Mymensingh, in 1933 to attend the Government School of Art in Calcutta. His talent was quickly established: in 1938 he graduated first in his class and in that same year he received the Governor's Gold Medal in the All India Art Exhibition for a landscape painting. Mukul Dey, first Indian Principal of the Government School of Art, appointed Abedin lecturer.

When famine descended on the countryside in 1943 and rural communities began streaming into wartime Calcutta, Abedin went out into the streets to record their plight. His starkly simple yet compelling ink drawings hastily rendered on cheap paper with bold, rapid brushstrokes lent urgency to the famine's crippling effects on individuals and families. But who were these starving people, especially the women and children, in Abedin's drawings?<sup>39</sup> As noted economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen pointedly reminds us, class patterns of casualty are always uneven, but certainly during India's last major famine the greatest impact was on rural laborers and craftsmen, fishermen and river transport workers.<sup>40</sup> Abedin's powerful imagery appeared in

newspapers such as the Calcutta daily *Swadhinata* and periodicals published by the Communist Party. Abedin was involved with the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, founded in 1942 at the height of the Quit India Movement. This association, along with other cultural organizations like the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), propounded radical initiatives to mobilize a people's movement. As cultural theorist and dramaturge Rustom Bharucha argues, "Whether or not the initiatives were as 'mass-based' and 'democratic' as communist historiography would like to believe, the point is that organizations like the PWA and the IPTA were the first attempts to co-ordinate creative and political collaborations on an all-India scale . . . at levels unsurpassed in post-independence India."<sup>41</sup> Twelve of Abedin's famine drawings "from life" also appeared in Ela Sen's *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal*, published in Calcutta by Susil Gupta in 1944 (fig. 3.9).<sup>42</sup> In Abedin's frontispiece, a gaunt woman holds a sheltering arm around two emaciated children, the younger with a pronounced distended belly and sticklike legs, perhaps too weak to walk on his own. The mother wearily moves forward in search of food—her bowl is empty. The near absence of architectural or landscape elements visually reinforces the family's displacement and alienation. Ela Sen offers a trenchant condemnation: "In final analysis it is correct to characterize this famine as not 'an act of God' but as political failure."<sup>43</sup>

With the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan in 1947, the meaning of nationality changed significantly. A new geography of belonging and alienation was created. Partition uprooted ten million people. Abedin returned to Dhaka, the newly named capital of East Pakistan. He soon joined the Normal School and worked on the establishment of the Government Institute of the Arts; he also nurtured an international profile, attending the Slade School in London in 1951–52 and securing a Rockefeller Scholarship in 1956–57, when he toured North America and Mexico.<sup>44</sup> From a review of his exhibition history, Abedin's work consistently engaged with the Bengali countryside, with rural labor and struggle, and in his work "peasantry equated with human dignity."<sup>45</sup>

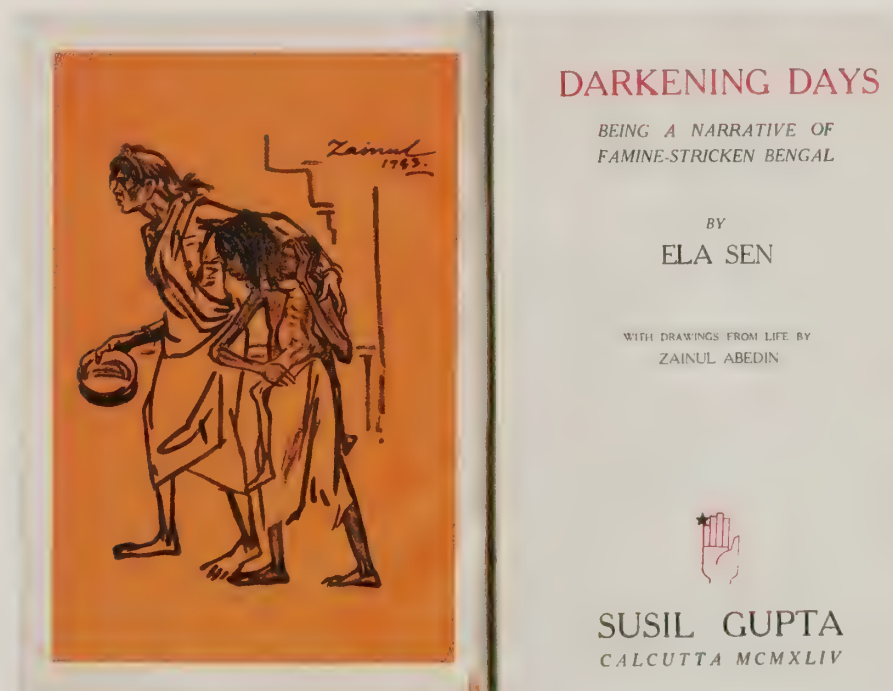


People familiar with the history of Bangladesh's struggles for cultural identity and recognition will be keenly aware of other key moments and events in this interconnected personal and historical biography of twentieth-century South Asia: the mid-century Language Movement, the 1969 Mass Movement, and the 1971 War for Liberation. The significance of the use of Bangla resonates most fully when placed within this historical context. Urdu, the primary language of West Pakistan, was imposed as the national language, resulting in protests in East Pakistan as early as 1948. Abedin's active participation in these movements can be charted in his art production. Especially noteworthy is his sixty-five-foot scroll painting *Nabanna* (Harvest Festival) that commemorated the 1969 Mass Movement. Comparable with the format of the indigenous narrative scrolls of Bengal, the story of rural life unfolds episodically from early prosperity of the people to their impoverishment during colonialism and forced migration. Abedin's title is particularly resonant as it recalls the IPTA's best-known, landmark production of Bijon Bhattacharya's play *Nabanna* (1944), which dramatized the effects of the Bengali famine in a peasant family. This four-act play was performed by the IPTA in Calcutta on a revolving stage and outside the city on makeshift stages where the realism was achieved "through the use of the peasants' dialect, details about village life and local traditions, combined with Jatra songs and props."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, as Bharucha persuasively contends: "One could even argue that the dramaturgical breakthroughs in temporal and spatial shifts in action, sharply edited to highlight an epic perspective on the multiple dimensions of the Famine, constituted an *avant-garde* practice in its own time."<sup>47</sup> From 1947, the peasantry of East Pakistan was poorer and felt alienated from its counterpart in the western part of the country. Abedin's birthplace, the region of Mymensingh, a major producer of rice and jute, was particularly devastated. Like Dutt's close association with his natal village, Abedin maintained his ties with Mymensingh, and it was here in 1971 that he elected to denounce the prestigious honor of Hilal-e-Imtiaz (Crescent of Excellence), conferred by the President of Pakistan, in support of the Bengali non-cooperation movement against the military.

In concert with establishing institutions for training artists, Abedin actively lobbied for a dedicated crafts museum, understanding well the role of muse-

ums in the construction of national identity. Not only did Abedin travel the country, where he saw folk arts everywhere, he enlisted district magistrates to assist in collecting dolls, wooden crafts, pottery, kanthas, and jewelry distinctive to their areas. Abedin brought these objects together in a large exhibition in Dhaka in 1955-56, and followed up with the article "Amader Shilpakala" (Our Arts and Crafts) in 1958, published in *Masika Mohammedi*. This Bengali monthly, published from Calcutta and Dhaka, was one of several nationalist newspapers and journals with Muslim ownership and an almost exclusively Muslim circulation. After independence, *Masika Mohammedi* resumed publication from Dhaka.<sup>48</sup> From this exhibition, Abedin developed the idea of establishing a crafts museum with practicing artisans.<sup>49</sup> Brochures produced by the Bangladesh Folk Art and Crafts Foundation credit Abedin with the insight and inspiration for the museum to be developed as a national celebration of village crafts. The site selected is highly symbolic. Sonargaon, the "golden village," richly and nostalgically evokes a glorious past—an idealized, utopian state of prosperity and material abundance. Bangladesh's national anthem is based on a Swadeshi song composed by Rabindranath Tagore in 1906. "Amar Sonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal) captures Bengalis' attachment to their distinctive, rural landscape. Here is one particularly evocative verse:

Fig. 3.9. Zainul Abedin's frontispiece and title page of Ela Sen's *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1944)







Mughal emperor Jahangir transferred the capital fifteen miles north to Jahangirnagar, present-day Dhaka. Within close proximity of the museum are numerous architectural monuments, visual reminders of this deep history: the tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (reigned 1393–1410); the beautiful single-domed Galdi Masjid, dated 1519; Mughal-period structures such as the Panam Bridge; and the remains of a once-flourishing company town with factory, treasury, and residential buildings. The Nil Kuthi was a commercial building for trade in *nil* (indigo), an important export commodity and cash crop in Bengal, the biggest producer of indigo in India. Abedin's selection of this site for the Crafts Museum also calls attention to Sonar Bangla's rich commercial heritage, especially in textiles.

A beautiful *rajbari*, a multistoried brick mansion with elaborate plaster detailing situated on the edge of a water tank, served as first home of the Folk Art Museum (fig. 3.10). Today this historic building announces the entrance into an extensive complex of gallery spaces, an outdoor crafts exhibition area, and village structures on a forty-six-acre parcel of land. Two buildings serve as architectural bookends: the 1901 *rajbari* and the Shilpacharya Zainul Folk Art and Crafts Museum, completed in 1975. The latter's main gallery is devoted to textiles—especially the beautiful *jamdani* (fine, loom-patterned muslin) for which this region is famous, and *nakshi* kanthas, including one commissioned from Aminur Nahar of Khulna featuring a map of independent Bangladesh. As with most museums, only a small portion of the now vast collection of eight hundred kanthas is currently on display.<sup>51</sup> Records do not indicate how many of these kanthas were assembled by Abedin to form the core collection. However, Abedin's personal collection of approximately forty kanthas remains in his Dhaka home, where Mrs. Jahanara Abedin, his widow, generously shares them with the occasional visiting scholar.<sup>52</sup> Several have been exhibited, such as in London's Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibitions of 1979 and 1988.<sup>53</sup>

These kanthas are indeed extraordinary, and I'd like to discuss three in detail: a small, rectangular kantha with an inscription; and two square kanthas, one of which includes an inscription and dates. Part of the charm of the rectangular kantha is in the sense



Fig. 3.10. The 1901 *rajbari* at the Folk Art and Crafts Museum, Sonargaon, Bangladesh. Photograph by the author

Fig. 3.11. *Ashan* kantha. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Danielle Mason

Ah,  
we all drop our toys and come running to your lap.  
The grazing cows in the pastures, the crossing at the ferry,  
all day the call of birds in your villages dappled with shade;  
in your grain-filled courtyard the days of life edge away,  
Ah,  
mother, all of my brothers are your cowherds and planters.<sup>50</sup>

Sonargaon served as the capital of Bengal until the seventeenth century, when the governor for the



of spontaneity and slightly irregular, playful combinations of bold forms (fig. 3.11) A lotus predictably anchors the center, but four other medallions of comparable size and brightly colored whirling patterns compete for our attention. With their circular shapes on long pendants they may represent the seasonal *kadamba* flowers (see fig. 1.14). Especially interesting is the arrangement of domestic articles around the center: a large-toothed comb, a pair of scissors, and reading glasses, almost concealed but cleverly placed opposite the scissors to set up a visual relationship, perhaps referring to the demanding skill of embroidery itself. Three lines of Bangla, running along the length of the cloth and framing the center, read: "seat [ashon] fit for an emperor [badshah]," "be happy," and "made by M(S)ajanan's mother." If we interpret "emperor" as an epithet or honorific title used by Muslims for a bridegroom, this kantha represents a mother's felicitous gift to the new bridal couple. This reading is supported by the pair of fish, symbolic of union and an important gift in Bengali marriage rituals, as well as the rectangular welcoming mat. As Pika Ghosh's "Rags to Riches" (this volume) richly demonstrates, kanthas were presented to the bride and groom during the wedding ceremony.<sup>54</sup> Following other conventions, this kantha is framed by a broad geometric red-and-black border which then supports a series of semicircular shapes filled with floral patterns, birds, fishes, horses, deer, and elephants. In his discussion of *alpana*, a related but ephemeral women's art of rice-paste designs, Dutt identifies this curved form as a *chala* and the pictures enclosed as *chalchitras*.<sup>55</sup> Taking our cue from this term, *chala* references the rural Bengali hut with its bent bamboo roof as well as one of the most distinctive elements in Bengali temple architecture, and seasonal *puja pandals*, temporary shrinelike structures housing the deity for the duration of the festival (see figs. 4.31, 4.33); hence the embroiderer's evocative shorthand here resonates with a rich visual repertoire of this regional form.

A second kantha from Abedin's collection assembles an even more diverse assortment of personal articles and kitchen implements associated with the domestic sphere: a comb, a winnowing tray (*kula*), tongs (*chimte*), and a curved knife for cutting



Fig. 3.12. Kantha, dated 1316 [1909], Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Danielle Mason



Fig. 3.13. Detail of a square kantha, Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Danielle Mason



Fig. 3.14. Central panel of a square kantha depicting Satya Pir riding a leopard and possibly Satya Narayana or Dakshin Ray on a horse. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 1516). Photograph by Darielle Mason

vegetables (*bothi*; fig. 3.12; see also plate 53). This accumulation of everyday objects and products draws on the cultural construct of prosperity. The border design is made up of a finely rendered geometric pattern with a second border of meandering vine with alternating red and black flowers, perhaps *champa lata* (champak flowers). From each corner springs a wonderful and varied flowering tree that reaches toward the center. Three separate inscriptions, not fully integrated into the overall composition, record ownership and dates: "this bundle [*gathri*] owned by Shrimati," "Tuesday, in the month of Bhadra (August–September)," and "Magh (January–February) 1316 [1909]," referring of course to the Bengali calendar. The third kantha roughly corresponds to the overall arrangement of the previous one with a central eight-petaled lotus and a colorful, vibrant tree at each corner, but here the motifs are rendered in a very geometric style and fill far more of the field. The remaining design elements include a stylized bird, perhaps a peacock or parrot, standing beside a tree, and a comb and mirror. What is particularly intriguing is the largest and most enigmatic of these designs: a simple rectangle outlined in



red with a series of tall, pointed forms (fig. 3.13; see also fig. 5.19). While Niaz Zaman labels this kantha a "*bostani* [a square wrapper for books and valuables] with what seems to be a fertility motif,"<sup>56</sup> I would like to pursue another interpretation: a highly abstracted mosque, mihrab, or *taziya*, a replica of the tomb commemorating the seventh-century martyrdom of Husain, Muhammad's grandson, at Karbala in present-day Iraq. Elaborately crafted from colored paper and wood, these portable *taziya*, highly visible components of public mourning and expressions of grief around the tragic event at Karbala, are processed through the streets annually during Muharram (see fig. 4.21). In *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, a book documenting the extensive kantha collection at the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, author Perveen Ahmad discusses the "dual portraiture of *rath* and *masjid*" as a metaphor for communal harmony.<sup>57</sup> As illustration, she shows several kanthas from the contiguous geographic areas of Jessore, Faridpur, and Khulna that she argues represent both a *ratha* (Hindu temple chariot), easily identifiable by wheels, multiple levels, and colorful flags, and a *masjid* (mosque) with minarets and domes (much like that in fig. 5.8). While the *ratha* and *masjid* are placed directly opposite one another or side by side on these kanthas, the *masjid* or *mihrab*-like rectangle on Abedin's kantha appears without precedent: the individual forms suggesting multiple minarets and shallow domes are extremely attenuated. The small rectangular form nearby could be read as temple or *masjid*. This ambiguous or perhaps deliberately blurred iconography presents an opportunity to speak more specifically about religious imagery and its inclusive potential.

In contrast to the often exuberant and virtuosic display of motifs densely embroidered on many quilts, a square kantha from Khulna in Dutt's collection focuses exclusively on two male figures—one riding a leopard, the other on horseback—facing one another in an architectural structure that suggests a *masjid* or a tomb of a saint with four corner towers (fig. 3.14). Even with the abbreviated iconographic details and forms stitched in outline, we can identify the figure astride the large feline as Satya Pir, a legendary saint or holy man in the form of a Muslim *pir*



who was extremely popular in Bengal, while the figure on horseback may represent Satya Narayana, a majestic form of the Hindu deity Vishnu. Their appearance together on this kantha points to the complex ways in which "Muslim" and "Hindu" devotional practices have been intertwined in Bengal.

The vast folk literature on Satya Pir spanning the early sixteenth century to the height of the cult's popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates his wide appeal. Both Sen and Dutt engaged with this rich textual and visual corpus. Sen classified these stories as "Muhammadan folk-tales" in his 1920 *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, yet recognized the catholicity of views expressed as appealing to both Hindus and Muslims.<sup>58</sup> Different interpretations of these epic oral narratives and poems made their way into the visual and performative realms. Dutt, writing on "The Tiger's God in Bengal Art" in 1932, discussed several narrative scroll paintings of Satya Pir, also known as Barekhan Gazi, where the Gazi is depicted in discrete registers riding on a tiger or a leopard.<sup>59</sup> Some writers have speculated that the appearance of the leopard comments on the decline of the tiger in its natural habitat and marks a dramatic shift in the fragile ecosystem of south Bengal. While this is no doubt a factor, the apparent visual exchangeability of these felines also points to the flexibility of imagery rather than to an iconographic orthodoxy.<sup>60</sup> More recent scholarship in the field of religious studies has shifted the focus away from a strict adherence to religious boundaries in interpreting this material. As Tony Stewart writes, "The common concerns framing the invocation of Satya Pir were not those defined by membership in a religious group of any sort but rather those defined by the context of life in early modern Bengal."<sup>61</sup> In worshipping this powerful saint, Bengalis sought general well-being, wealth, and protection from wild animals and diseases.

Stressing his universal appeal, Satya Pir's dress and appearance are often eclectic. He may take the form of a wandering mendicant in tattered rags or a patchwork robe, holding a beaded rosary. On Dutt's kantha, he is bearded, wearing a Muslim cap and clutching the *asa danda*, or standard of authority. Intriguingly, this distinctive metal disc with two con-

vex ends—which Dutt first identified as a symbol of Satya Pir—is common to both figures on this kantha. Kramrisch exhibited a twentieth-century brass *asa danda* from the Sundarbans in *Unknown India* and followed Dutt's visual linkage of this standard with Satya Pir as well as with the ancient past.<sup>62</sup> It is worthwhile to quote her catalogue entry in its entirety, as it rehearses many of the different strands of this complex tradition:

The double axe-shaped symbol of Lakshmi, the goddess Fortune, represents the hope (*asha*) of the Ghazi, a Moslem religious mendicant who carries the staff (*danda*) topped by this symbol to Hindu houses in the morning during the *Vrata* celebration in the month of Magh (January-February), chanting that the goddess will give a boon to those who perform the rites—including the honouring of the Ghazi by a gift.

The tiger-god of Eastern India holds as his symbols a rosary and an *Asha Danda*.

The symbol of the double axe appears in Harappan art of ca. the 3rd millennium B.C. on seals and painted pottery.<sup>63</sup>

As noted, the figure on horseback on Dutt's kantha may represent Satya Narayana, a form of Vishnu, or Dakshin Ray, "The Lord of the South," which is, of course, southeast Bengal. As Dutt wrote, "In eastern Bengal the honor of occupying the throne of the tiger's deity appears to have been divided between the two deities known as Dakshin Ray and Barekhan Gazi whose protracted feuds and ultimate reconciliation have been described at length in the *Ray Mangal* of Krishnaram Das [1686]."<sup>64</sup> They are the antagonists in a complex and layered story from the Sundarbans, "the beautiful forest" and habitat of the great Bengal tiger, and Twenty-four Parganas that addresses the struggle for supremacy over the forest and its resources. Indeed, Richard Eaton writes of the importance of Muslim *pirs* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as not so much in their confrontation with non-Muslims as in their confrontation with the forest.<sup>65</sup> Satya Pir and Satya Narayana—the two epithets are used interchangeably—represent a fusion of Islam, in the Muslim concept of a *pir* or saint, with Hindu and local practices. Worship of Satya Pir, however, declined in the nineteenth century as Muslim





Fig. 3.15. Dakshin Ray, painted clay, from the South Twenty-four Parganas District. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 2354). Photograph by the author.



Fig. 3.16. Detail of a kantha from the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 14) with an image of Dakshin Ray.

reformers began to distance themselves from this heterodox figure, and Hindus successfully accommodated him into the elastic theological structure of the *avatar* (divine incarnations) theory of Vaishnavism as Satya Narayana. The worship of Dakshin Ray grew in importance in rural Bengal, especially as a *brata* household rite among women, who sometimes used terra-cotta images in their devotional practices.

An analysis of a large painted clay image of Dakshin Ray from South Twenty-four Parganas, in the Gurusaday Museum, is particularly useful for our purposes here (fig. 3.15). This abbreviated image is a model of simplicity: a tall wheel-thrown cylindrical base supports a hand-built flat slab of roughly equal height. Dakshin Ray sports a broad mustache and all his facial features are accentuated by the addition of paint; clay forms for nose and ears are attached separately to the cylinder. His head is crowned by a tall, flat, leaf-shaped form, whose organic nature is reinforced by the plant issuing from the top of his head as well as the continuous foliate pattern that follows the form's curvature.

This particular iconography of Dakshin Ray relates to the epic poem *Ray Mangal*, mentioned earlier, in which the conflict between Dakshin Ray as the tiger god and the Gazi was resolved in a syncretic compromise: Dakshin Ray would continue to claim authority over lower Bengal while "people everywhere would show respect to the holy *pir* Badi Gazi Khan by worshipping his burial spot, where there would also be a symbol of the tiger-god's head."<sup>66</sup> This head is part of the pictorial vocabulary of several kanthas in Kramrisch's collection. On a particularly lively kantha (fig. 3.16; see also plate 14) each quadrant contains an image of Dakshin Ray while directly above or below are circular designs suggesting *alpanas*, the ritual floor paintings produced by women. Moreover, these images are placed in close proximity to other religious motifs, such as Shiva in his aniconic or symbolic form (the *linga*; see figs. 1.24, 1.25) and as a long-haired mendicant or *yogi* holding prayer beads. The Gazir *patas* illustrating Dutt's "The Tiger's God" as well as narrative Santal *patas* collected by W. G. Archer, during his ICS post-



ing in Bihar from 1930 to 1946, and exhibited by Kramrisch include scenes of worshipers at the shrine of the tiger's god. Indeed, such a scene may be depicted on a Bonovitz kantha (see plate 83). Both Kramrisch's and Dutt's kanthas place these sacred ritual objects into an active field of domestic observances and lived experiences. These stitched forms constitute an act of worship—an ongoing appeal for the general welfare and prosperity of the family.

The Dutt, Kramrisch, and Bonovitz kantha collections also contain many wonderful and varied representations of deities, especially Durga and Krishna (see plates 1, 9, 15, 62, 80). Imagery from everyday life is used to depict the lives of the gods and vice versa. For example, in the popular Vaishnavism of rural Bengal, the pastoral romance of Radha and Krishna and its particularly secular recasting are richly interpreted and celebrated. Kanthas frequently depict Krishna in a great peacock-shaped boat ferrying Radha and the *gopis*, or milkmaids, across the Jamuna River (see plates 1, 2, 6, 37). Referred to as *naukavilas*, the pleasure of a boat ride, these trips were also popular among wealthy Bengalis, who would hire boats or barges for outings along the Hooghly River on the occasion of festivals (see plates 4, 5). Temples and especially temple chariots are also favored motifs (see plates 3, 26, 28, 29, 37, 62), their forms shared by a range of vehicles, as in the unfolding story of Vishnu's rescue of a young boy as related in a wonderful 1916 *Naramedha pata* by Durlav Chitrakar in Kramrisch's collection (fig. 3.17).

### Conclusion: Collecting, Exhibiting, and Their Vulnerabilities

An archive is not neutral but historically and politically constituted; as such I have attempted to foreground what was at stake in situating "living traditions" as an oppositional category in the rhetoric of nationalism. The Gurusaday Museum and the Shilpacharya Zainul Folk Art and Crafts Museum are institutional legacies of charismatic individuals with particular pedagogical projects motivated by Bengali cultural ideology; certainly Dutt's nationalist project offered another alternative to the rural Gandhians, the radical Swarajists, and the revolutionary terrorists who saw armed struggle as the only means to



independence rather than Gandhi's strategy of nonviolent resistance. As archives, museums are engaged in interpretative practices. The label texts at the Gurusaday Museum, for example, deliberately maintain the regional designations at the time the pieces were collected. This "undivided Bengal" is a utopic ideal but also a polemical framework to claim the historical significance of the collection. Moreover, Dutt systematically documented makers' names and villages as part of his collecting practices. Over time, however, and in different publications, this record has become dislodged from the subsequent scholarship on kanthas and placed into the realm of anonymity. Regrettably, Dutt's nationalist agenda was also evacuated when his writings were published posthumously with the title *Folk Arts and Crafts*:

Fig. 3.17. Detail of a *Naramedha pata* by Durlav Chitrakar. Bandarpur, Undivided Bengal, 1916. Opaque watercolor on cloth-backed paper. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1964-169-1a,b





Fig. 3.18. Meera Mukherjee (Indian, 1923–1998), *Kantha*, 1990. Bronze sculpture. Mukherjee's signature style is created with wax threads prior to casting, a technique she studied with brasscasters in rural Bengal, Orissa, and especially in Bastar District, Chhattisgarh. Courtesy of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Kolkata

*The Collected Papers*, rather than "The Living National Art Tradition of Bengal," his working title.

Even though the Gurusaday Museum now receives financial support from India's Ministry of Textiles, it is resolutely a regional museum celebrating regional art. In contrast, the Folk Art Museum in Sonargaon is a national institution prompting a comparison with the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum, its counterpart in New Delhi. Founded in 1956, the Crafts Museum, as it is more popularly known, exhibits and promotes crafts from all over India. One popular venue is the Crafts Demonstration Programme, in which participating artisans show techniques and sell their particular crafts. In his analysis of this institution, Paul Greenough identifies three underlying themes of the museum's practice: "enduring official anxiety about the place of artisans in India's industrializing 'economy'; ideological concern for the unity and continuity of India's craft 'tradition'; and the representation of India to its own citizens and to foreigners as a 'crafts nation.'"<sup>67</sup> Perhaps looking to India's Crafts

Museum as a successful model, Bangladesh's Folk Art Museum clearly has a similar agenda and mandate. The kantha "revival" has been linked to a wider revival of crafts with its revitalization program led by a national organization: the Bangladesh Handicraft Cooperative Federation.<sup>68</sup> India's government support of the production of handicrafts across the country was institutionalized in the creation of the All India Handicrafts Board in 1952. In West Bengal, the Bengal Crafts Council, spearheaded by the tireless Ruby Palchoudhuri, teaches poor women embroidery and then markets their work in Kolkata; and Mahamaya Sikdar heads Sibon Udyog, a non-governmental organization (NGO) for underprivileged women (see figs. 1.35, 1.38, 1.39). Unlike other organizations today that are led by designers or development specialists and may create conditions of alienation from the work, Sikdar is perhaps uniquely positioned as she herself is a third-generation embroiderer from Sylhet and her hereditary knowledge may enrich the kanthas produced at Sibon Udyog. Scholars have critiqued the "preservationist" position by calling attention to the movement from use-value to commercialization and attendant problems, including exploitation of the craftsperson, with women particularly vulnerable. "Overall, there is very little critical analysis of women's handicrafts. While development projects have been favored by the state and nongovernmental organizations as low-cost, low-risk interventions, their value is compromised by the persistence of exploitative forms of production."<sup>69</sup> How different then are these practices today from Saroj Nalini Dutt's *mahila samitis*? In the 1920s and 1930s, the idealization of women in the rhetoric of nationalism was fundamentally linked with the domestic sphere, with women's experiences and activities applauded as traditional and authentic. Saroj Nalini and Gurusaday Dutt's pioneering efforts to improve the lives of women and to give them the tools for economic empowerment were informed by prevalent urban discourses about women's education and widow remarriage. Internationally recognized social worker Aroti Dutt (1924–2003), the Dutt's daughter-in-law, energetically carried on the work of the *mahila samitis* and extended it to include a kantha production center.



The idea of living traditions still has currency in the discourse on creative practices in India, yet art critic Geeta Kapur has thoroughly interrogated its usefulness in a post-colonial context. In a project not unlike Jamini Roy's, Kolkata sculptor Meera Mukherjee (1923–1998) had a personal engagement with metal-casting techniques she learned from rural and *adivasi* (tribal) communities in Eastern and Central India that became embedded in her praxis to produce a distinctive folk art style. Mukherjee's sculptures were often concerned with women inhabiting a rural landscape of labor and leisure, as seen in her 1990 *Kantha* (fig. 3.18). The monumental figure of a solitary woman, with dramatically elongated arms emphasizing her work, stitches the elaborately embroidered quilt spread out before her. Mukherjee's sculpture was inspired no doubt by her own work with a group of young women in rural Bengal in the 1980s. That engagement resulted in *Stitch Painters of Dhanket*, the first exhibition shown at the Seagull Foundation for the Arts in Calcutta. Seagull is a pioneering independent press with a special focus on alternative and experimental creative work: film scripts by the great Bengali director Satyajit Ray, short stories by social activist and writer Mahasweta Devi, drawings and paintings by Nandalal Bose and by celebrated artist K. G. Subramanyan. Seagull was also the press responsible for publishing Gurusaday Dutt's papers. Long associated with Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, where he both studied and taught, Subramanyan (born 1924) has likewise been deeply engaged with the conceptual framework of living tradition and its creative possibilities. Not so much concerned with the survival of the past as with the enrichment of the present, Subramanyan's formulation offers a powerful counterpoint to this debate. As he writes: "If art, too, has to have a real presence in today's society and add to its quality of life, and not dissipate itself in a plethora of undesigned growth, we shall need a model within which the creative individual will be in live contact with his environment and through it the larger world—and there will be numerous creative individuals of this kind at various levels of expression. This alone makes a living tradition."<sup>70</sup>

## NOTES

1. B. N. Mukherjee, "Stella Kramrisch: The Western Interpreter of Eastern Art," *Nandan* 13 (1993), p. 7.
2. G. S. Dutt, *The Folk Dances of Bengal* (Calcutta: B. S. Dutt, 1954), p. 5.
3. The School of Industrial Arts in Calcutta was established in 1854 as one of the first four art schools founded by the British and renamed the Government School of Art in the 1870s.
4. Chatterjee positions the middle class as the principal agents of nationalism in colonial Bengal. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 35.
5. Dutt presented "The Living Traditions of the Folk Arts in Bengal" as a lecture with lantern slides before the India Society in 1935 and then published it in *Indian Arts and Letters* (London) 10, no. 1 (1936), p. 25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
7. Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1990), p. 41.
8. Samik Bandyopadhyay, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, p. xix.
9. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Aims and Methods of Indian Art," in *Essays in National Idealism*, (1909; 1st Indian ed., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), p. 43.
10. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 6.
11. Peter Robb, "South Asia and the Concept of Race," in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 31–32.
12. Dutt, "Folk Art and Its Relation to National Culture," in *Folk Arts and Crafts*, p. 5.
13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004), p. 658.
14. Ramachandra Guha, "The Independent Journal of Opinion," *Seminar* 481 (September 1999), n.p.
15. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 350.
16. Dutt published in numerous other journals, including *Journal of Arts and Crafts*, *Roopa-lekha*, *Calcutta Review*, *Prabuddha Bharat*, *Indian Arts and Letters* (London), and *The Studio* (London), an important Arts and Crafts journal. I have elected to focus on the *Modern Review* and the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, following Dutt's own frequency in these two journals.
17. Mitter, *Art and Nationalism*, p. 317.
18. Following Jamini Roy's career would take us too far afield in this essay, but I would like to draw the reader's attention to an important exhibition in 1931 inaugurated by Stella Kramrisch and described by Partha Mitter as no less than a "political manifesto." For more on Roy see Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).



19. G. S. Dutt, *Catalogue Exhibition of Folk Arts* (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1932 [exhibition, Indian Society of Oriental Art, March 20–28, 1932]).
20. See Abanindranath Tagore, *Banglar Brata* (Calcutta, 1919). Dutt acknowledges Abanindranath's important monograph on *alpana* floor designs but claims that the "art of the decorative wall designs in tempera . . . was first discovered by me in the year 1931." Dutt, "Living Traditions," p. 27.
21. Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts*, p. 15.
22. "Bengal's Folk Art Faced with Decay," *Statesman*, March 23, 1932.
23. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), pp. 108, 112.
24. G. S. Dutt, "The Art of Kantha," *Modern Review* 66, no. 4 (October 1939), p. 457.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 458.
26. G. S. Dutt, *The Bratachari Synthesis*, 3d ed. (Calcutta: Bengal Bratachari Society, 1981), p. 22.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
28. Rochona Majumdar, "'Self-Sacrifice' versus 'Self-Interest': A Non-Historicist Reading of the History of Women's Rights in India," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 22, nos. 1 and 2 (2002), p. 28. In 1922 Rabindranath founded the Rural Reconstruction Centre at Sriniketan, about two miles from Santiniketan.
29. Samita Sen, "Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal," *Gender and History* 5, no. 2 (1993), p. 233.
30. Numerous scholars have written on Virginia Woolf and her feminist projects; also of note is Leonard Woolf's involvement with the Women's Co-Operative Guild beginning in 1912. See J. H. Willis, Jr., *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press, 1917–41* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 244–45.
31. Sila Basak includes an itemized list and brief description of all 201 kanthas in *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007), pp. 178–92. Another large collection dating from the 1920s and 1930s is housed in the Asutosh Museum at the University of Calcutta. The museum, founded in 1932, is named after Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, former vice chancellor of the university. Mukherjee invited Kramrisch in 1925 to join the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture. Devaprasad Ghosh, one of Kramrisch's students and first curator of the museum, sent students to villages around Calcutta to collect Bengali folk art. See Mason, "Interwoven in the Pattern of Time"; and *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writing of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. with biographical essay by Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 12. While this is indeed an extraordinary collection, the kanthas and the building in which they are displayed are currently in very poor condition, suffering from water leaks and general neglect.
32. Accession no. GM 1481. Asis K. Chakrabarti, Executive Secretary and, formerly, curator of the Gurusaday Museum until his retirement in 2007, published some seventy kanthas in *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (Calcutta: Arts India Publications, 2000), and devoted six color plates to this *sujni* kantha, pp. 94–99. He also provides the Bengali inscription on p. 63, but not an English translation. I thank Asis Chakrabarti for all of his assistance over the years in facilitating my continuing interest in the Gurusaday Museum. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Bijan Mondal, the museum's new curator, for sharing with me two large albums of Dutt's original photographs.
33. Dutt, "The Art of Kantha," p. 459.
34. Patrick H. Hutton, "Ideas about Tradition in the Life and Work of Philippe Aries," in *Questions of Tradition*, ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 275.
35. Dutt, "Living Traditions," p. 27.
36. Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts*, p. 67.
37. "Guru Saday Dutt," *Modern Review* 67, no. 1 (July 1941), pp. 21–22.
38. As Kramrisch had lived and taught at Santiniketan and then Calcutta, Bengal received pride of place in the exhibition. Bengal was by far the single largest region represented, including thirty-one kanthas. For an analysis of the exhibition, see Katherine F. Hacker, "Displaying a Tribal Imaginary: Known and Unknown India," *Museum Anthropology* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1999), pp. 5–25.
39. Abedin's emphasis on women and children parallels the results of a survey conducted among those who were destitute and living on the streets of Calcutta in September 1943, which concluded that a large proportion were women without their spouses. Paul Greenough argues that the abandonment or exclusion of familial dependents constituted the greatest social cost of the famine, excepting famine deaths. Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 220–23.
40. Amartya Sen, "Foreword," in Nikhil Sarkar, *A Matter of Conscience: Artists Bear Witness to the Great Bengal Famine of 1943* (Calcutta: Punascha, 1998), p. 7.
41. Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28.
42. Ela Sen, with drawings from life by Zainul Abedin, *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1944). Interestingly, Susil Gupta was the imprint of A. K. Mukherji, publisher of several journals including the Bengali *Bishan* and the *Eastern Economist*, closed by the British in 1941 when Japan entered World War II. Mukherji's own political contacts included Netaji Subash Chandra Bose (1887–1945?), and he supported the Axis powers in the campaign for independence against England.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
44. Zainul Abedin, an exhibition shown at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, April 8–29, 1957. I thank Daina



Welsh, reference librarian at the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, for providing me the brochure of Abedin's exhibition of fifty-two watercolors, etchings, and sketches, including *Weaving, Farmer, Boats, A Village Woman, Mother and Child, and Bengali Maiden*.

45. Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, *The Quest of Zainul Abedin* (Dhaka: International Centre for Bengali Studies, 1993), p. 12.
46. Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority / Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 77–78.
47. Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular*, p. 47.
48. See Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal and the Politics of Protest, 1928–1934* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 145.
49. Mrs. Jahanara Abedin, personal communication, 2006.
50. Translated in 1971 by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., and Ronald B. Inden and quoted in Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, p. 9. Compare Tagore's verse with a verse from the Bratachari National Anthem of Bengal, composed by Dutt:

Glory to Golden Bengal, the land of mighty rivers!  
Glory to the Speech of Bengal  
To the aims of Bengal,  
To the ideals, traditions, and rhythms of Bengal,  
Glory to the produce, arts, valour, strength, unity  
And wisdom—  
To the priceless Contribution of Bengal!

- G. S. Dutt, "Bratachari Foundation Celebration and Its Significance," *Modern Review* 65, no. 4 (April 1939), p. 429.
51. Basak provides brief descriptions of 109 of these kanthas in *Nakshi Kantha*, pp. 208–13.
52. Darielle Mason and I visited Mrs. Jahanara Abedin at her home in Dhaka in February 2006. I would like to thank Mrs. Abedin, as well as Professor Mahmudul Haque, then Director General of the Bangladesh National Museum, and Zinat Mahruxh Banu, Keeper of Ethnography and Decorative Art, for their assistance with kantha collections in Dhaka.
53. *Arts of Bengal: The Heritage of Bangladesh and Eastern India* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979); and *Woven Air: The Muslin and Kantha Tradition of Bengal* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1988).
54. Sila Basak notes that on the occasion of a wedding in Khulna approximately fifty years ago, twelve kanthas were given to the informant's father and seventeen to her mother; another informant, from Bolpur (about two miles from Santiniketan), notes that a minimum of four kanthas are to be given to the bride. Basak, *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal*, pp. 165, 156.
55. In addition to locating the importance of the *chala* in indigenous domestic and religious architecture, Dutt extends the reach of the *chala* to Mughal and Rajput architecture. He looks back as well to early antecedents, noting that "roof-like designs which are employed on the glass images and some-

- times even brass and ivory images of popular Bengalee deities and particularly of Durga and other Mother Goddess images, appear to have their earliest prototypes in the similar Chals found on the Mother Goddess figures reproduced in . . . Marshall's *Mohenjo-Daro and The Indus Civilization*." G. S. Dutt, "Indus Civilization Forms and Motifs in Bengali Culture," *Modern Review* 66, no. 5 (November 1939), p. 583.
56. Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, rev. ed. (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 2004), p. 85.
57. Perveen Ahmad, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha: Bangladesh National Museum Collection* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997), pp. 50–51. Compare Abedin's kantha with the National Museum collection, plates 61–65.
58. Dineshchandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920), p. 98.
59. G. S. Dutt, "The Tiger's God in Bengal Art," *The Modern Review* 52, no. 5 (November 1932), pp. 520–29.
60. *Arts of Bengal*, p. 44.
61. Tony K. Stewart, "Alternate Structures of Authority: Satya Pir on the Frontiers of Bengal," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 23. See also Stewart's excellent "Satya Pir: Muslim Holy Man and Hindu God," in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 578–97.
62. In a later article, Dutt extended his initial analysis of the *asa danda* to argue for its visual similarities with "Unicorn" seals from Mohenjo Daro and with pinnacles on contemporary Shaivite temples. Dutt, "Indus Civilisation Forms and Motifs in Bengali Culture."
63. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India*, plate XLVIII, cat. 325, p. 109.
64. Dutt, "The Tiger's God in Bengal Art," p. 521.
65. Richard M. Eaton, "Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans, 1200–1750," *Agriculture and Human Values* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1990), p. 8.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
67. Paul Greenough, "Nation, Economy and Tradition Displayed: The Indian Crafts Museum, New Delhi," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 242.
68. Niaz Zaman provides a useful overview of the trajectory of crafts revival in Bangladesh in *Art of Kantha Embroidery*, pp. 3–7.
69. Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, "Women, Work and the Imagination of Craft in South Asia," *Contemporary South Asia* 13, no. 3 (September 2004), p. 287.
70. K. G. Subramanyan, *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1987), pp. 92–93.







## Embroidering Bengal: Kantha Imagery and Regional Identity

Just as worn cloth is recycled to make kanthas, so designs and stories are creatively recombined to adorn their surfaces. The motifs and narratives found on these quilts are shared with Bengali literature and visual and performing arts; together, they indicate a common regional pool of resources from which individuals across generations have drawn to create their own versions in their own media. While particular elements of these narratives and motifs might appear in other regional traditions, as a set they are distinctive to Bengal. A careful examination of the kanthas in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections suggests that embroiderers selected from this rich regional repertoire, skillfully juxtaposing images and identities and creating variations by size, color, and composition to fashion a unique product.

This essay highlights some of these distinctively regional motifs and narratives and probes the embroiderers' choices from this common pool, including the moments they portrayed and the relationships they created among different elements. As embroidering is a slow, meticulous, and individualized process, stitching onto kanthas familiar episodes from well-known Bengali narratives, with the particular nuances that they had accrued over time, may also be understood as a personal act of interpretation. As with most women around the world, the everyday lives of Bengali women were seldom recorded prior to the late twentieth century. For many of these women, kanthas may well be the only physical trace of their presence to have survived, the only evidence by which to recover their viewpoints and listen to their voices. Kantha imagery thus offers a valuable point of entry into an otherwise hidden domain and complements the primarily male perspective found in the region's contemporaneous literature and visual arts.

Many of the narratives depicted on kanthas are grounded in beliefs and practices shared among Hindus and Muslims. They often highlight natural forms and material culture tied to the region's topographical and climatic features. Bengal is situated in the low-





Fig. 4.1. Shyam Bandh (lake), Bishnupur, West Bengal. Photograph by the author

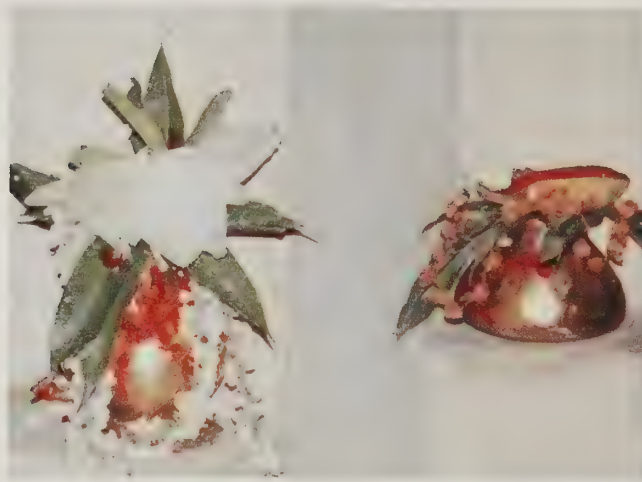


Fig. 4.2. Water-filled copper pots are used to express the embodiment of the divine. Photograph by the author

lying delta formed by the web of crisscrossing distributaries of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, where much of the land is flooded annually by torrential monsoons, so it is not surprising that water and the activities surrounding it feature explicitly in or underlie many of the tales. On kanthas water can be the site of pleasures such as riverboat rides and lotus blossoms (fig. 4.1), as well as perils such as crocodile attacks and snakebites in the stagnant ponds of the Bengali countryside. Water sustains the rice crop that women help to process in its various stages, from transplanting to winnowing (see fig. 1.6). It is also the source of the rich variety of fish and shellfish that are prepared as delicacies for gods and

humans alike. This preoccupation with water is also expressed in the embodiment of the divine in water-filled pots (fig. 4.2). Clay icons, molded from the rich silt deposited by the rivers, are returned to the riverbeds at the end of festivals. And human existence itself is often imagined as a ride down the river, death as a crossing over to the far shore.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the inhabitants of the teeming jungles and swamps supported by this riverine network, particularly tigers, play a central role in the construction of many kantha narratives. Tigers are the vehicles of deities and charismatic figures, from the pan-Indic goddess Durga to the more localized Satya Pir (Satya Narayana) and Dakshin Ray (see fig. 3.14), who helped clear the forests for human habitation.

Narratives shared across South Asia are also localized in a variety of ways, including regionally specific architecture, clothing, customs, and even current events. Thus, on these kanthas the god Shiva resides in a temple whose form draws upon Bengal's curved, thatched-roof huts (see fig. 1.3), and Krishna steers a *mayurpankhi*, a type of peacock-headed pleasure boat popular with Europeans and the Bengali elite. Goddesses usually wear their saris in the traditional Bengali manner, without the fitted blouses that were gradually introduced as women took on more public and political prominence with the advent of the nationalist movement (see plate 37). Regional identity is thus continually and dynamically being constructed through such iterations, which map the contours of the imagination of these women.

The sheer frequency of some themes on kanthas urges us to pay attention to their deployment and to the social, religious, and political contingencies at the historical moment of their making. The choice to depict the martial goddesses Kali and Durga, for instance, may assert their ascendancy in elite urban circles in the nineteenth century, and also their shifting roles as the nascent nation began to be imagined as a mother goddess rising to crush the demon of colonialism. Meaning, as Roger Abraham has recently reminded us, occurs "not behind our vernacular artifacts and interactions, but *in* them."<sup>2</sup>

In their renditions and details, the images on kanthas also remind us that regional identity is by no means homogenous. Rather, it intersects with myriad



dimensions of lived experience in both explicit and more subtle ways. Several kanthas in the Bonovitz Collection depict articles that index the activities structuring women's everyday experience, such as the nutcracker (*janti*) used to cut the areca nuts before they are folded inside heart-shaped betel leaves to create *pan*, a digestive eaten across South and Southeast Asia (fig. 4.3). Preparing *pan* to the particular taste of each family member—attending to the size and type of leaf and adding various condiments such as fennel, cloves, cardamom seeds, and tobacco—is still an elaborate daily morning ritual in many households today.<sup>3</sup> Another household item, the kohl holder (*kajal lata*), is employed to collect soot from an oil lamp, often from the home altar, which is then used to darken the eyelids, much like eyeliner. However, when the nut cutter and betel leaf are placed adjacent to the kohl holder and pairs of fish (*jora mach*; fig. 4.4), the assortment evokes the roles these items play in special rituals such as weddings, where the bride may be presented with a pair of areca nuts in her mouth, a *kajal lata* tucked in her hair, and a pair of *pan* leaves<sup>4</sup> covering her face until the auspicious moment when the couple exchanges their first glance (*shubho drishti*; see fig. 1.16).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this ritual is one over which women preside, along with the priest who will subsequently supervise the conference of the bride to the groom's family (*kanyadana*).<sup>6</sup> The presentation of these items on the kantha may impart value to the daily intimate rituals of Bengali women, urban and rural, Hindu and Muslim, as well as to the larger community celebrations that secure and renew relationships among generations and anchor family networks and neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> The vernacular is thus particularized across multiple domains.

The repetition of themes and motifs on a range of visual media in Bengal offers valuable comparisons for contextualizing their embroidered renditions. Comparing the elaborate imagery and intersecting narratives sculpted on the terra-cotta panels that cover the walls of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century brick temples,<sup>8</sup> for example, with their stitched renditions from a century or two later allows us to discern both continuities and changes.<sup>9</sup> These themes and motifs are also displayed on

painted *pa[ā]tas* (book covers) and in the deity figures of metal, stone, and clay that the embroiderers would have had ample opportunity to handle at home and observe in temples. They also appeared on the long narrative *patas* (hand scrolls) used by itinerant performers who carried tales from village to village, and who were surely a major conduit for their circulation.<sup>10</sup> As can be seen in the living tradition, these painter-singers constituted their own versions of familiar narratives and characters, injected personal reflections, and relied on the audience's



Fig. 4.3. Detail of plate 53 showing *janti* and *pan*



Fig. 4.4 Detail of plate 53 showing kohl holder and pair of fish



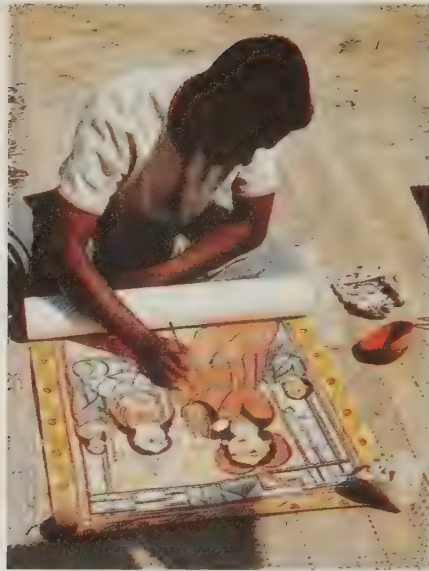


Fig. 4.5. Montu Chitrakar painting black outlines for the figures on a hand scroll, Noya, Midnapore, West Bengal, December 1999. Photograph by the author

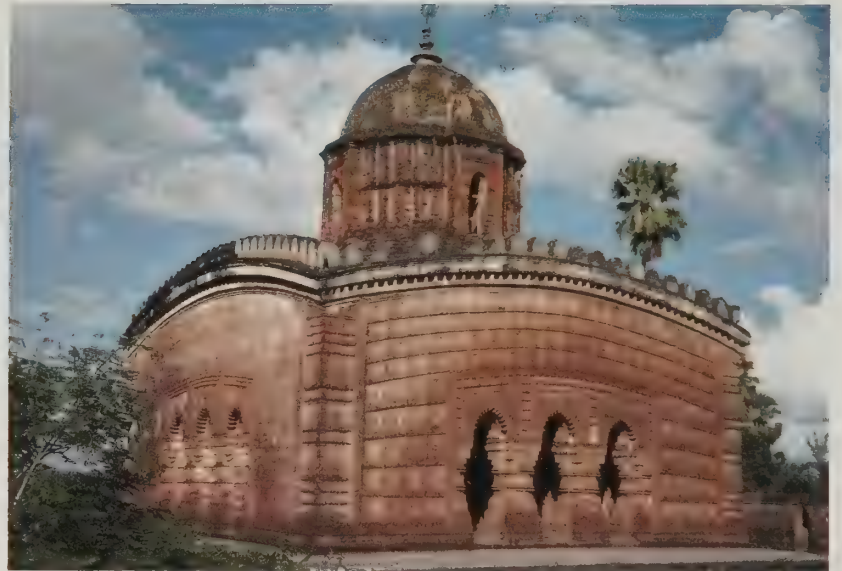


Fig. 4.6. Madan Mohan Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal. Photograph by Katherine Hacker

knowledge of the themes to create particular emphases and nuances, making this a remarkably fluid process of transmission.

Recited texts and songs remain important aspects of worship and entertainment today, as well as valuable resources for determining the repertoire of episodes and ways of representing them that may have been accessible to the designers of kanthas. For example, the goddess Durga is honored by the recitation of the *Devi Mahatmya* during her annual festival,<sup>11</sup> and songs dedicated to the beloved god Krishna continue to be performed in temple courtyards, often accompanied by drumming and expressive dancing, as depicted on a kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 37). The women who stitched these kanthas would likely have participated in such activities and known the words to some of the songs and texts. In the domestic sphere, the stories and lullabies used to tuck children into bed at night were another rich source available to embroiderers.

These themes and motifs also appeared in newer genres, such as the woodcut prints that emerged as part of the colonial encounter with Europe, and whose easy replication and circulation might account for the visual conventions they so often share with kanthas. Likewise, the proliferation of inexpensive single-scene Kalighat paintings, produced as pilgrimage and tourist souvenirs in the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, may help explain the closely related versions found on the embroideries.<sup>12</sup> Such prints and paintings may have been owned by the families of the embroiderers, and hence have been available as reference when designing a kantha.

The embroideries share many elements with other media from the region. There are close ties with the imagery on hand scrolls, for example, including the preference for a strong, bold line (fig. 4.5). Likewise, the architectural elements such as the arched windows and pillared entrance seen on several kanthas (see plates 11, 84) reflect actual nineteenth-century domestic architecture and can be compared with related representations on scrolls and other media. Many kanthas organize floral and figural forms within prominent ornamented borders to create a gridded surface (see, e.g., plate 81), reminiscent of patterns of nonfigural imagery seen on the terra-cotta surfaces sheathing many Bengali mosques and temples (fig. 4.6). Particular motifs such as the male and female busts on a kantha in the Bonovitz Collection resemble the basic form of the cameo figures flaunted on nineteenth-century terra-cotta temples (see plate 71). They also share with floor painting (*alpana*) the radial arrangement of motifs and narrative imagery from a central circular motif, often a full lotus blossom.



By comparing various versions of a tale, we may also discover how the meaning shifts with context and material. Take, for example, the *vastraharana*, an episode from Krishna's youth popularly encapsulated by the image of Krishna seated high in a tree hoarding the clothes he has stolen from the *gopis* (cowherd women) as they bathed in the river below, while the naked women beg for their return. On a temple wall such as that of the Keshta Ray in Bishnupur, West Bengal (fig. 4.7), for viewers who may have known the story from other contexts, the nakedness, vulnerability, and humility of the devotee in her encounter with the divine might be more significant than many of the story's other nuances. However, the same basic elements of the story when stitched on a textile for use at home (fig. 4.8) might very well draw attention to the centrality of cloth and clothing, as well as inviting the viewer to contemplate how impropriety is constituted or how gender relations are negotiated in everyday contexts.

While some kanthas depict narratives and practices we can recognize from contemporaneous written accounts or woodcut prints or from continuities with current practices, others are harder to identify with such specificity. The same basic motif may take different connotations in a particular location on the textile and in relation to other motifs placed near it. For example, a pair of feet stitched in red thread at the base of the tree where Krishna steals the bathing women's clothes (see fig. 4.8) may represent Radha,

the primary figure in Krishna's escapades with these women, because Radha is identified with the goddess Lakshmi, whose presence is often evoked in the form of double-spiral footprints in *alta* (red dye) or white rice paste (*alpana*) in Hindu homes (see figs. 1.10, 1.11).<sup>13</sup> However, paired feet have a long history in the region for representing Vishnu, the Buddha, and subsequently the Prophet Muhammad (Qadam Rasul). The single foot outlined in blue thread that can be seen between the large bird and elephant on another part of this kantha (see plate 3) may even suggest the presence of a local holy person such as a *pir*, perhaps with charismatic powers to control wild animals, a skill valued immensely by early settlers engaged in the processes of deforestation and settlement building.<sup>14</sup>

We know relatively little about the individual women who embroidered the kanthas in these collections and cannot reconstruct with much precision the historical conditions or criteria they weighed as they selected motifs and tales and arranged them in particular sequences. However, some general aspects of the process can be discerned from contemporary practice and also from visual and material cues embodied in the kanthas themselves. When the same motif or episode appears on more than one kantha in these collections, for example, we can compare the choices made by each of the women embroiderers.

At the most basic level, the size and shape of each kantha must surely have been factored in the

Fig. 4.7. *Vastraharana*, south façade, Keshta Ray Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4.8. Detail of plate 3 showing the *vastraharana* episode.





design process. Some motifs lend themselves better to particular shapes and spaces. Boat rides, for example, are usually featured along the length of one side of a kantha, suggesting that a fit between the length of the boat and the shape of the kantha was recognized and exploited. Other especially flexible motifs such as foliage, floral scrollwork, fish, and birds are employed in various sizes, shapes, and colors to fill the surfaces between major scenes. Visually arresting compositions and colorful motifs are often deployed both to strengthen particularly worn or darned areas of fabric and to divert attention from the damage or repair. Likewise, the choice of colors for the embroidery depended on the threads available from the borders of older saris used in making the quilts. The occasion for which a kantha was made, the person for whom it was created, and the relationship between giver and recipient may equally have undergirded the selection and organization of imagery on a kantha. For instance, were kanthas that display kitchen implements, cosmetics, and jewelry (see plates 38, 53, 54) created for a bride's trousseau? Such gaps in our knowledge about the processes and conditions surrounding their making remind us that any reading of the imagery on these kanthas is inevitably partial and perhaps precarious. Yet keeping these issues at the forefront while we examine the visual imagery also helps deepen our awareness of and appreciation for the products and the resourcefulness and creativity of their makers.

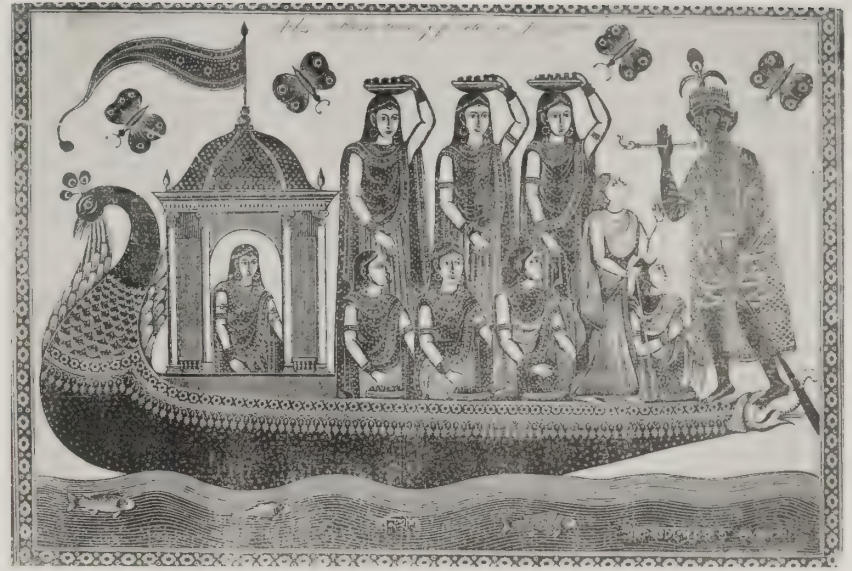
A detailed analysis of one magnificent kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 1) makes these points clearly. The embroiderer organized the fabric surface with extraordinary coherence, presenting episodes from the life of the beloved Krishna along with ways of worshiping him popular in Bengal since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Gaudiya Vaishnava devotional community coalesced under the inspiration of the mystic saint Chaitanya (1486–1533).<sup>15</sup> Chaitanya promoted by example an intensely personal and deeply emotional engagement with Krishna, and the tradition's primary texts advocate remembering the stories of Krishna's life as a means of devotion.<sup>16</sup> Chaitanya also sang *kirtan* (devotional songs),<sup>17</sup> which explore Krishna's relationship with his beloved Radha.<sup>18</sup> She features

prominently on kanthas, as in most other media, as she was also the primary role model for the worshiper's goal of attaining intimacy with the charming cowherd god. As the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition cohered, Krishna stories were translated from Sanskrit into Bengali and interpreted in many ways that made them familiar to Bengalis, and thus available to the embroiderers of kanthas.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of visual elements on this kantha further grounds these Krishna stories in Bengal. Emanating from the rosy tips of the ripe, seed-laden lotus at the center (see figs. 1.8, 1.9) are four scenes that fill each side of the square textile. Each scene is framed by green foliage and peacocks that locate the events in the lush groves of Vrindavan in North India, near Delhi, where these episodes from Krishna's childhood and youth are believed to have taken place. However, the setting could just as well be the fertile, green Bengali terrain. The globular golden blossoms of the *kadam* (*kadamba*) tree, the spot for many of Krishna and Radha's forest rendezvous, set the scene (see figs. 1.12–1.14). The blue lotuses at the base of these trees do not exist in nature, but they would have been familiar to Bengalis from the *Ramayana*.<sup>20</sup> In Bengali versions of that epic, these magical blue flowers were obtained by the hero Rama and offered to the goddess Durga when he sought her help to overcome the demon Ravana.<sup>21</sup> The flowers at the four corners thus also remind us of Krishna's relationship to Rama and his identity as another incarnation of the absolute deity Vishnu, following the Rama avatar to protect the world (Ramanuja).<sup>22</sup> Rather wonderfully, the embroiderer of this piece, as we know from her stitched inscription, was named Kamala—that is, "Lotus."

Krishna's boat ride with Radha and the other *gopis* across the Jamuna River—an episode called *naukavilas*—features prominently on this kantha (fig. 4.9). The *mayurpankhi* is lavishly detailed in a dexterous array of stitches that distinguish, for example, the soft, velvet texture of the bird's sinuous neck from the coarseness of wet wood planks comprising the body of the boat.<sup>23</sup> In Kamala's kantha, the blue of the peacock prow balances the similarly colored Krishna (also called Shyama, "the Dark One") poised at the tail end, and the plumes radiating outward from the downturned neck complement the peacock





feather in his headdress. Can we interpret the choice of boat, as well as the color and compositional arrangements, as creative strategies to relocate the divine dalliance from North India to the Bengal delta, making the eternal play of the gods more familiar and contemporary? Might such preferences imbue the episode with the immediacy and accessibility sought by the Gaudiya Vaishnava spiritual quest?

In this scene, Krishna acts as the boatman (*majhi*), casually dangling an oar from one hand while raising his flute to his lips with the other. The *gopis*, bearing their dairy goods on their heads or in front of them, align themselves in two tiers. Radha is given pride of place in the covered pavilion. Closest to Krishna is Barai Buri, the elderly widow who served as liaison between the lovers, often complicit with Krishna in creating opportunities for his trysts with Radha. Here she is depicted with her hand raised, perhaps whispering to him.<sup>24</sup> The image conflates the many rides Krishna offered the dairymaids across the turbulent river, one of the numerous situations in which he sought to waylay them, and to seduce Radha in particular.

This immensely popular narrative is not part of the pan-Indic *Bhagavata Purana*, the earliest text devoted to Krishna's life.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it is elaborated in

Bengali sources, including the fifteenth-century Bengali poets Chandidas and Vidyapati, seventeenth-century temple terra-cottas, popular prints (fig. 4.10), and the later *patas* and *patua* songs, and continues to be retold today in numerous other contexts.<sup>26</sup> Because multiple visual and verbal variations of this episode survive, we can glimpse how the elements comprising the scene have been reworked to explore different perspectives, emphases, and moods, and elicit a range of emotional responses. In Chandidas's narration, Krishna's dinghy could hold only two people at a time so that he ferried each of the *gopis* individually, taking Radha last and using the opportunity to demand her jewelry and her affections as payment:

I've this boat of five wood planks.  
I myself control the helm.  
Loading it with dairy goods,  
You intend to cross the stream.  
Look, pay heed to my demands.  
I won't budge until you pay.  
I took all your girlfriends over  
Safely, just as you had asked.  
If I am to ferry you,  
Give your necklace on deposit.  
Since I saw your moonlike face,

Fig. 4.9. Detail of plate 1 showing Krishna ferrying the *gopis* across the Jamuna River, the *naukavilas* and *danakhanda* episodes

Fig. 4.10. The same scene as in fig. 4.9 depicted on a metal-cut print, probably produced in Battala, North Calcutta, early nineteenth century. Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum



I've staked out the Jamuna.  
 If you'll now give your consent,  
 I'll take you across at once.  
 I've immersed my thoughts in you.  
 Hold me tight, make good the tolls.  
 That is what I crave completely.<sup>27</sup>

The jewelry draping the female figures on this *kantha* perhaps offers clues to the outcome of the boat ride narrated by the poet.

In Bengali *patua* songs recorded in the twentieth century, Krishna's amorous intent and aggressive demand for Radha's jewelry are easily associated with a wide range of riverside incidents, including robberies and attacks on women:

Pay the toll and get on the boat Radhe Vinodini  
 To take all of your companions I will charge an anna each  
 To take Radha I will have a golden earring.  
 Take the gold, take my sari, I can give you everything  
 I cannot cross the river on my feet.  
 Hearing this Krishna escorted her across.  
 One by one the *gopis* went to Mathura.<sup>28</sup>

The particular choice of epithet, Radhe Vinodini, describing Radha as bestower of pleasures, perhaps alludes to such possibilities.

The nineteenth-century urban poet Ram Basu's version may voice the concerns of women undertaking these journeys. His Radha defends herself as she describes the outcome, presumably to her companions and family:

Taking me into the boat the rake started all his tricks. He said: "See, Rai! The Jamuna river is turbulent. You have worn a blue garment. Mistaking it for the clouds, the wind is getting excited." In the middle of the river, he then asked me to strip. Alas! Where am I to hide my shame?<sup>29</sup>

Such renditions also suggest analogies with the popular pleasure trips taken on the Hooghly River by elite Bengali and European men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, accompanied by dancers, courtesans, or ordinary prostitutes. A contemporary satire on Calcutta's new elite practices, *Hutom Penchar Naksha*, suggests that these diversions may have

involved the *babu* demanding the dancer to undress, even threatening to withhold her payment if his overtures were refused.<sup>30</sup> Two other *kanthas* in the Kramrisch Collection (see plates 4, 5) depict such recreational aquatic rides. One features a couple holding hands; the other shows two women at the bottom, with chairs on their right for the two male figures, perhaps the procurers of these pleasures.

The poet Vidyapati also imagined the incident from Radha's viewpoint, but with a different nuance:

On sharp currents of the river  
 The boat was launched.  
 But Krishna was young,  
 He could not steer it.  
 So I swam across.  
 My bracelets snapped,  
 My necklace broke.  
 Friend, O friend,  
 Do not scold me with harsh words.  
 My ear-rings dropped in the river.  
 I searched for them till dusk.  
 My make-up was washed away.  
 My face looks clean as the moon.  
 Idling on the banks of the river,  
 My breasts were scratched with thorns.  
 Says Vidyapati:  
 You talk so plausibly,  
 People might even believe you.<sup>31</sup>

The poet's closing comment indicates that Radha's recounting of the event is at variance with the evidence on her body. He points, instead, to the special sweetness of the Krishna-Radha relationship that was prized by the spiritual leaders, poets, and theologians of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement. Married to another man—as the embroiderer indicates by stitching red *sindur* (vermilion powder) in the part of her hair—Radha had to undergo great difficulties to keep up her trysts with Krishna, and also to manage her loyalties in the face of much humiliation, particularly from her in-laws. In compromising her social standing and forsaking all else for her love of Krishna, she became the paradigm of devotion.<sup>32</sup> Radha's capacity to long for Krishna, to serve him, and to risk everything for him, was regarded as the ideal emotional



experience for devotees to emulate. Expressions of Radha and Krishna's amorous encounters are as ubiquitous in embroidery as they are on temple walls and in *kirtan* (devotional songs), privileged over Krishna's other relationships, including his friendship (*sakhya*) with the other *gopis*, the brotherly love of Balarama, or even the bonds of parental affection (*vatsalya*).

The boat ride is further layered with another well-known encounter between the divine lovers. The scene is identified explicitly by Kamala as *danakhanda* (toll collection episode), and the word, sewn next to the boat, directs our attention to the baskets of dairy goods on the women's heads.<sup>33</sup> In the *dana* incident, Krishna, posing as tax collector, blocks Radha's way, yet again planning to seduce her in lieu of payment. In Chandidas's verse Krishna declares:

You cannot evade me, Radha, using tricks or speeches.  
Offer me your love in place of payment.  
I am Krishna. I collect the taxes on this pathway.  
Why don't you make good your taxes, Radha?<sup>34</sup>

At first Radha chides him, saying: "You're collecting revenues to earn a living, Krishna? . . . Isn't there the slightest sense of shame within you, Krishna?"<sup>35</sup> Later, however, she succumbs, in part because her awareness of his divine nature begins to override her concern for propriety:

Oh my Krishna, as I went toward market in the city,  
You were staring at me as, from path to path, you  
followed;  
Only then I realized that what's happened was  
predestined.  
You, the son of Nanda, will not ever let me leave you.<sup>36</sup>

Does folding the two events explicitly into a single scene accentuate their underlying similarities? In both cases Krishna sets up the encounter, and on both occasions Radha walks into a risky situation that could compromise her social standing as a married woman. Thus the two incidents reinforce the fundamental call of the divine to which the mortal surrenders, even if warily, struggling to balance social responsibilities with the lure of Krishna's flute. Could their negotiations in the two encounters fur-



Fig. 4.11. Detail of plate 1 showing Krishna is astride a horse composed of eight *gopis*

ther allude to the need for reciprocity between the divine and the devotee, a premise shared among the expressive devotional (*bhakti*) traditions?

The businesslike negotiations that occur in both cases—Krishna's aggressive demand for jewelry and sexual favors from Radha as payment—are also not impossible to imagine as part of the lived experiences of women who embroidered kanthas as they went about their daily routines. Could the conflation of the two episodes hint at similar incidents and entanglements, welcomed flirtations or sexual harassment that these women might have encountered at the *ghats* (riverbanks, docks) and bazaars or on secluded wooded paths?<sup>37</sup>

In the scene placed opposite the boat ride on this kantha, Krishna is astride a magical horse composed of eight *gopis* (fig. 4.11), with the raised hand of one of the *gopis* serving as his stirrup. Such composite *gopi*-beasts, which can also be elephants (see plate 4), give visual form to the women's desire to unite with the divine. Gaudiya Vaishnava theologians emphasized the *gopis*' longing, inherent in their separation (*viraha*) from the divine. Indeed, much of the symbolic power of the adulterous relationship between Krishna and Radha lay in the *gopis*', and the devotees', experiences of anticipation, expectation, and fantasy rather than fulfillment. In the devotional songs, for example, Radha yearns for total union with Krishna:





Fig. 4.12. Detail of plate 1 showing Krishna stealing butter from his mother Yashoda's butter churn. Kamala has set the episode in a *dalan* temple, a Bengali architectural form



Fig. 4.13. *Dalan* temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal  
Photograph by the author

Let the earth of my body be mixed with the earth my beloved walks on.  
Let the fire of my body be the brightness in the mirror that reflects his face.  
Let the water of my body join the waters of the lotus pool he bathes in.  
Let the breath of my body be air lapping his tired limbs.  
Let me be sky, and moving through me that cloud-dark Shyama, my beloved.<sup>38</sup>

Underscoring how completely Radha desires Krishna through a conjoining of the very materials of which she is composed, this verse resonates with the wonderfully entangled bodies that support the corporeal form of the divine. This desire was identified by the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition as the path to salvation, the greatest sweetness (*madhurya*) to be cherished.

In the depiction on this kantha, a single *gopi* leads the horse. Most likely she is meant to be Radha, here isolated and privileged just as she was inside the boat's pavilion. Yet here her position points to more complexities in their relationship. Whereas Krishna trapped her on the boat and on her way to the market, she now leads his horse. In this episode and certain others, it is Radha who controls the lovesick youth.<sup>39</sup> Does balancing these scenes across from each other hint at the delicate negotiations of power between Krishna and Radha?<sup>40</sup> And can such negotia-

tions relate to those the embroiderers encountered in their daily lives?

Between the two depictions of the lovers, Kamala has illustrated the popular tale of the naughty baby Krishna who crawled to his mother Yashoda's butter churn and grabbed the butter she had prepared (fig. 4.12; see also plates 2, 6). In this rendition of the scene set in a local *dalan* temple (fig. 4.13), Yashoda catches him red-handed. Woodcuts from this period identify the episode as *dadhimanthan* (churning of yoghurt), suggesting yet another Bengali version of a pan-Indic narrative.<sup>41</sup>

Such stories surely struck a chord among the women who embroidered them, and who very likely had experienced similar moments in raising their own children. This intimacy is valued by Vaishnava devotees. If the closest relationship imaginable with the deity is that of a lover, next in importance is the love of a mother for her son. The worshiper treats Krishna as if he were her own baby, taking care of him, loving him, and also reprimanding him for his misdemeanors. Yet the image reminds us that this is no ordinary baby. On the left, Yashoda sits with Krishna in her lap, but as the kantha's maker and users alike would have known, when she forces his mouth open, instead of the butter or yoghurt just stolen from her kitchen, she glimpses universes swirling therein.<sup>42</sup>





Across from this revelation is a scene of the divine couple flanked by eight women (fig. 4.14). These women are likely the select set of Radha's eight closest friends, the group presented as it would have looked in a Krishna temple in Bengal (fig. 4.15). As is still the practice, temples often kept sets of eight painted wooden female figures, which would be brought out from storage, dressed, and arranged similarly on either side of the divine couple for celebrations such as the autumn reenactment of the *rasalila*. As seen in narrative depictions of this dance (fig. 4.16), the *rasalila* involves Krishna replicating himself to dance with each of the *gopis*, creating a circle formation that suggests his infinitude.<sup>43</sup>

In the scene on this kantha, one of the women extends her arm to hold a palm-leaf fan over the couple, thereby both honoring them and participating in their union. This figure is thus a visual expression of entry into the divine embrace, the aspiration of Gaudiya practice, as well as a model for the devotee/viewer. While she may be one of the eight main *gopis*, the figure is alternately identifiable as a *manjari*, one of Radha's young and beautiful female servant-companions. The *manjaris* enjoy a special position because, unlike the others who must leave when Radha and Krishna embrace, they stay and attend to the divine couple's every need, including serving them betel nut, fetching water, fanning them after

the heat of sexual intercourse, massaging their bodies, combing and braiding their hair, and entertaining them with song and dance.<sup>44</sup>

At first glance this embroidered depiction of Radha and Krishna appears to echo the typical poses of stone and metal icons still worshiped in temples and on home altars across Bengal, on which Radha raises one hand to Krishna as if to offer a lotus bud. In this stitched version, however, her hand links to his arm, their intimacy highlighted through touch, as if inert temple icons have been awakened to enact their relationship.<sup>45</sup> Radha's elegantly raised other hand and sumptuous attire suggest the composure and self-assurance of an upper-class married woman rather than a cowherd maid. Can we associate her deportment with the experiences of elite women in nineteenth-century Bengal? Literary works of the period also describe escalating familial stresses and the isolation of women, particularly of the upper classes, while their husbands turned to the adventures offered in the flourishing brothels of the thriving metropolis.<sup>46</sup> Radha's lot was likewise mixed. While she enjoyed Krishna's special attention, she was often betrayed and angered as he strayed to other women. Ultimately, Krishna left her, entering his next stage of life to become a king and the husband of another woman.

Although in mythological accounts this scene and that of the butter theft take place in Vrindavan,

Fig. 4.14. Detail of plate 1 showing Krishna and Radha flanked by eight women

Fig. 4.15. Figure grouping of Radha's eight closest friends, Rash Festival, Madan Mohan Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, November 2007. Photograph by the author



Fig. 4.16. Terra-cotta depiction of Krishna's circular dance. Shyam Ray Temple. Photograph by the author

on Kamala's kantha the settings for both are contemporary Bengal, as indicated by the use of a specifically Bengali architectural form, the flat-roofed, stucco-faced *dalan* temple (see fig. 4.13). Supported by neoclassical columns and arches, these temples were an essential component of nineteenth-century *zamindaris* (landholders' mansions) and were also incorporated into the palatial residential complexes of North Calcutta.<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, the architectural forms distinctive to Bengal, whether drawn from temple, palace, or village, appear often in kanthas, as in other arts of the region, and serve to bring the divine stories into the local landscape.

Another kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (fig. 4.17) depicts a second distinctively Bengali temple form, the *chala*, which features the large projecting eaves also found on thatched huts throughout Bengal (see fig. 1.3).<sup>48</sup> Although the *chala* is a popular temple roof form, the two-story profile shown here, with its miniature replication of the temple placed atop its sanctum, is particularly reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Shiva temple at Tarakeshwar. Renowned for helping women with infertility issues, the Tarakeshwar Temple continues to be a major pilgrimage site today. A particularly juicy scandal occurred here in the 1870s, when a newly married young woman, Elokeshi, became pregnant while her husband was away working in Calcutta. After she confessed to an entanglement with the *mahanta* (temple head priest), her husband slit her throat with a fish knife. Illustrations of this event made the image of the Tarakeshwar Temple common in Kalighat paintings

and woodcuts (fig. 4.18).<sup>49</sup> The identification of the temple on this kantha with the Tarakeshwar Temple is made more likely by the *linga* (pillarlike icon of the god Shiva) that can be seen installed inside its sanctum, topped by the three-leafed *bel* (also called Bengal quince), believed to be special to Shiva, as well as the suspended lamps.

The distinguishing features of brick temples are often shared with the elaborate mobile architecture constructed for a variety of Hindu and Muslim festivals across Bengal. These range from small, hand-carried palettes to wheeled, multitiered extravaganzas pulled by teams of horses or crowds of people. In the Hindu context, such processional carts are called *rathas* (chariots) and carry portable temple icons. The most elaborate *rathas* are used for the festival of Rathayatra (Rathayatra), celebrated during the monsoon season, when Lord Jagannatha (Lord of the World, identified with Krishna/Vishnu), his sister Subhadra, and their brother Balarama are taken for a ride, in part to give them some relief from the high heat and humidity.<sup>50</sup> Although this festival is most closely associated with Jagannatha's hometown of Puri, Orissa, the Bengali *rathas* take a variety of forms, as evidenced by their depictions in many kanthas and other media. On one kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 62; fig. 5.9) the three deities ride in a *ratha* in the shape of a nine-pinnacled temple. Two sets of four pavilions mark each of the corners, and one crowns the structure, but only five of these are visible from any one side, as on this kantha.<sup>51</sup> The embroiderer has delineated the uppermost pillared pavilion, where the deities are installed, with particular care to give its tower the slightly bulbous profile and horizontal ridges that typically adorn the terra-cotta exteriors of Ratna temples. Like the *chala* Tarakeshwar Temple, the *ratha* stitched here displays the popular hutlike curved cornice on its first and second stories (see fig. 5.10), a form seen in other temple types as well as in Islamic buildings such as mosques and tombs across Bengal.<sup>52</sup> Huge *rathas* covered with worked brass or silver, often two or three stories high, are used to this day to parade temple deities during the annual Ratha procession. Those at Kenduli in Birbhum District and Bishnupur in Bankura District, West Bengal (fig. 4.19), closely resemble the *ratha* on this Bonovitz kantha.

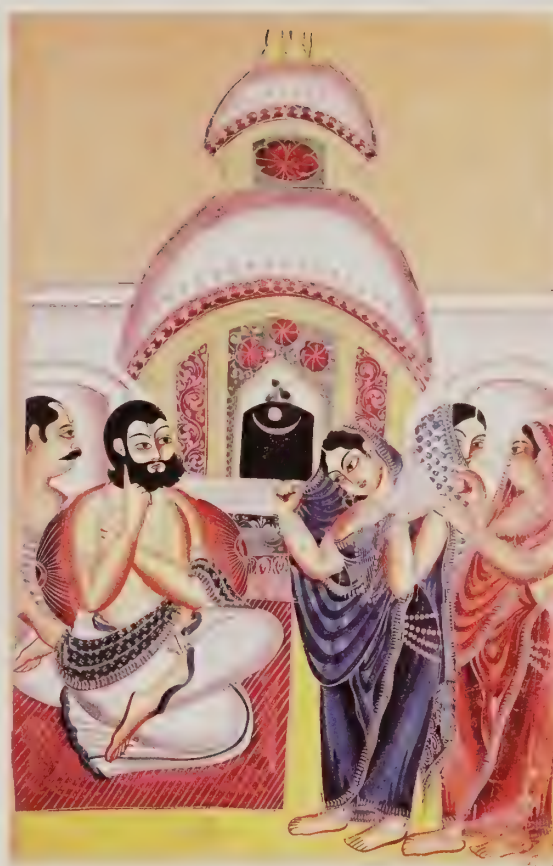






Muslims also created a form of processional architecture called a *taziya*, made and used especially during the annual Shiite festival of Muharram (Ashura) commemorating the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson at the battle of Karbala. *Taziyas* in Bengal often resemble *rathas*, sharing the same basic shape of a tiered cubical base topped with towers and flags, and, depending on their scale, they too may be hand-carried or pulled on wheels. Another kantha in the Bonovitz Collection may depict a *taziya* (fig. 4.20). It is much like the Jagannatha *ratha*, with the tower profile and horizontal striations of Ratna temple pinnacles, but rather than deities, its upper chamber contains two birds. The practice of placing two doves at the top of the *taziya* can still be seen, for example, at the Ashura celebrations in old Dhaka (fig. 4.21).

Like the small, glittering *taziyas* carried through the streets of old Dhaka today, the smaller, less permanent *rathas* sold each year in the bazaars of West Bengal for the Ratha festival are often adorned with a



variety of materials, including shimmering tinsel; stripes of bold colored paper, ribbons, or cloth; and carved white *shola* (dried banana pith). These similarities in material, aesthetic, and ornamental motifs are surely not coincidental. Indeed, in parts of West Bengal such as Murshidabad and Baharampur, the same artistic communities supply both *rathas* and *taziyas*. These closely related forms, like the region's mosques and temples, point to a common repertoire of materials, techniques, motifs, and aesthetic sensibilities not restricted by sectarian meanings, and from which artistic communities could draw, referencing established forms or introducing new materials and motifs into the older patterns. Such practices and products are shared among all Bengalis, Hindu and Muslim, Indian and Bangladeshi alike, consolidating a locality and a distinctive Bengali regional culture, rich in its complexity and heterogeneity.

Interestingly, one kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 3) juxtaposes motifs that tend to be associated exclusively with either Hinduism or Islam.

Fig. 4.17. Detail of plate 39 showing the *chala* temple form enclosing a *linga*

Fig. 4.18. Elokeshi meets the *mahanta*: an early episode from the Tarakeshwar murder case. Kalighat painting, c. 1875. Watercolor with silver details on paper, 16 x 11 inches (40.6 x 27.9 cm). Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London





Fig. 4.19. Ratha Festival, Madan Gopal Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, July 1996. Photograph by the author

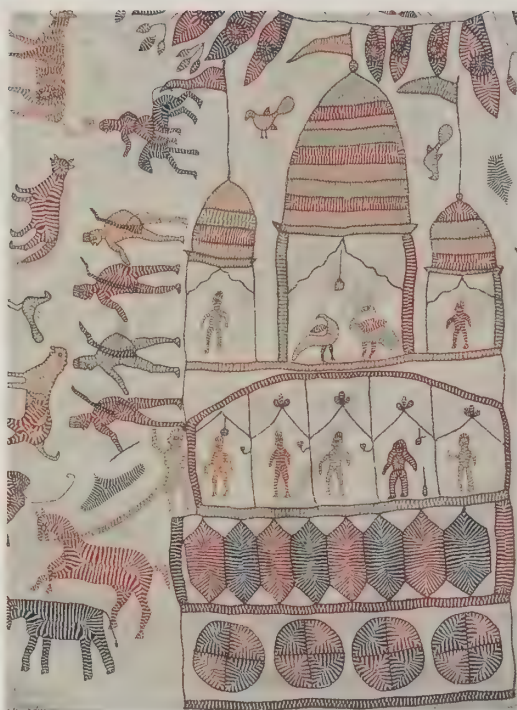


Fig. 4.20. Detail of plate 61 showing processional cart



Fig. 4.21. Ashura procession, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2006. Photograph by Danielle Mason

Its “Hindu” scenes include, among others, the *vastraharana* episode examined earlier (see fig. 4.8) and the epic battle of the *Ramayana*, with chariots and shrines holding *lingas* (see fig. 1.26). Yet near one edge, next to a satirical illustration drawn from a Kalighat painting, it also displays a small medallion embroidered in Arabic with the words *Ya Allah*, a common invocation of the name of God (fig. 4.22; see also fig. 1.29).

The explicit alignment of Hindu and Muslim forms seen here is rare in the visual culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The political implications of this embroiderer’s artistic choices in the context of the long, bloody, and bitterly contested partitioning of Bengal cannot be underestimated. Is there something inherent in the materiality and sphere of circulation of *kanthas* that allows for expression of what might be perceived as too radical and polemical, even unrepresentable, on the walls of a temple or mosque, for example? Are such accommodations possible in the negotiations of everyday lives and interpersonal relationships in ways that more public and institutionalized arenas of production and circulation do not easily permit? The choices on this *kantha*, aligning icons with narratives

and figural forms of deities with sacred words, seem to ask us to reflect on the religious charge of imagery, particularly when stitched on a fabric. Intertwined with these questions is the role of this assortment of imagery as available ornament.

This aligning and sharing of visual elements is also noticeable within the Hindu context between the Vaishnava and the Shakta (goddess-focused) traditions after goddess worship came to the fore in the eighteenth century. The intriguing imagery on one small *kantha* in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 7) points, I believe, to the complexities of this interaction (fig. 4.24). At first glance, the figures seem to be standard icons of, from left to right, the fierce goddess Kali, Krishna with his flute, and Radha with her female attendant.<sup>53</sup> However, details hint at a different, more complex, and specifically Bengali reading for this group—and one that would undoubtedly have had intense personal meaning for women living within the social and emotional entanglements of the joint-family system.

The story from which this image is drawn tells how Krishna became Kali (Krishnakali). Although there are many variations, Radha is identified in this



narrative as the wife of Ayan Ghosh, a devout worshiper of Kali, who also happened to be Krishna's uncle. When Radha's mother-in-law and sister-in-law, Jatila and Kutila (literally "twisted" and "cunning," respectively), suspect her relationship with Krishna, they seek to catch her with him. Although Radha usually manages to give them the slip, one time the lovers are indeed discovered. At that moment, dark-skinned Krishna changes himself into Kali (Dark One), growing her additional hands, flowing hair, lolling tongue, and gruesome accoutrements, thereby manifesting the typical form in which Kali is recognized and worshiped in the region. At this point, Ayan Ghosh's family falls at the goddess's feet and begs her pardon for intruding and disturbing their dutiful young daughter-in-law's prayers.

That transformation is depicted in this *kantha*, playing on the commonalities between the flute-playing Krishna and the corpse-trampling Kali (fig. 4.23). Their dark coloring,<sup>54</sup> for example, is contrasted with the lighter complexion of Shiva, who appears under Kali's feet, as well as of Radha and the woman on the right.<sup>55</sup> Although Kali is recognizable here as the wild-haired goddess, naked but for her garland of human skulls and brandishing a decapitated head and bloody dagger, the transmutation is not completed before Radha's in-laws invade her privacy. Different versions point to various telltale traces of Krishna still present on Kali's body; the analogousness of their headgear here suggests that Krishna's three peacock feathers are in the process of becoming Kali's banana-pith crown. On another, somewhat larger square *kantha* in the Kramrisch Collection (fig. 4.25), she still wears Krishna's dhoti and shawl and her feet are crossed in his dancing pose rather than showing her forceful stride with right leg forward (Dakshinakali). She is sometimes also depicted still holding his flute rather than her curved dagger.<sup>56</sup> Certain oral versions even explain Kali's hanging tongue as an expression of Krishna's embarrassment at being discovered with Radha.

The woman to the right on the smaller Kramrisch *kantha* (fig. 4.24) waves a fan as if she were Radha's attendant. However, she may instead be Radha's mother-in-law. She, too, is depicted in a transitional state, seeming to move from outrage to awe.



She approaches her daughter-in-law with one hand on her hip, as if intending to confront and berate her, but simultaneously offers service to the divine with her raised palm-leaf fan, a common act of veneration in both homes and temples. The rectangular form below her feet represents an *ashan kantha* on which lay devotees and priests sit or stand during worship rituals, the same function probably served by the actual *kantha* on which it is embroidered.

On this *kantha*, as in the story, Radha herself is no less a transitional figure. A married cowherd woman with her sari wrapped in the traditional Bengali manner, like her mother-in-law's, she nevertheless shares space with the divine, standing on Krishna's lotus pedestal and enjoying the proximity and privilege of touching his shawl (*chadar*). The scene is arranged so that she is placed between the more clearly demarcated divine and mortal figures, compositional choices that emphasize her intermediary status. Did Radha's experiences of conflict and her negotiation of divided loyalties at the core of this narrative speak to the women who chose to embroider it on *kanthas*? Surely, at the time of their wedding, these women juggled allegiances and attachments of their own as they

Fig. 4.22. Detail of plate 3 showing a roundel with the Arabic inscription *Ya Allah* just below a satirical image of a woman beating a man with a broom



Fig. 4.23. *Kali*. Kalighat painting, c. 1860. Watercolor on paper, 17½ x 11 inches (44.5 x 27.9 cm). Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

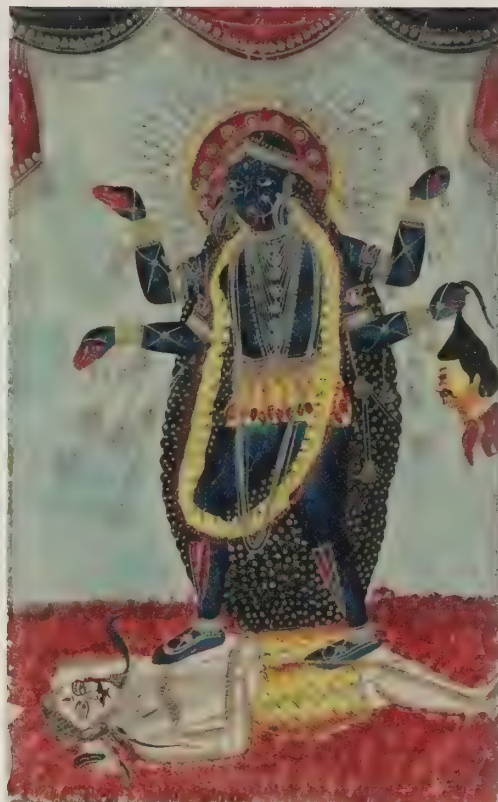


Fig. 4.24. Detail of plate 7

Fig. 4.25. Detail of plate 6 showing Kali in a dancing pose wearing Krishna's dhoti and shawl



moved from the customs and beliefs of their parents' home to those of their in-law family with varying degrees of success.

Krishna's transformation into Kali protects Radha from humiliation and chastisement. Embroidered on what may have served as a prayer mat, the depiction offers a powerful visual reminder of the immediacy and compassion of the deity, the object of ritual worship. However, it is also tempting to interpret this image as Kali emerging from Krishna's body. The visual emphasis on the analogousness and contiguity of the two deities parallels the overwhelming emphasis on love and intimacy already articulated in Krishna worship that refashioned Kali in the eighteenth century.

The outpouring of devotional poetry dedicated to Kali (called *Shakta Padavali* or *Shyama Sangit*) in eighteenth-century Bengal recast the violent and bloodthirsty martial goddess of earlier Sanskrit literature as a loving and caring mother.<sup>57</sup> Such images surely helped reposition Kali in expressive devotional terms that were already widespread in the region.<sup>58</sup> Does the juxtaposition of the terrifying goddess haunting cremation grounds, trailed by an animal sniffing for bloody severed limbs, with the beloved cowherd playing the flute that had mesmerized Bengal mitigate some of the horror and danger that had been associated with the goddess?

Shakta poets repeatedly invoke the intriguing allure of the terrifying yet desirable physical characteristics of Kali's typical iconic form (see fig. 4.23;



plates 8, 15). For example, the dangerous eroticism that had been associated with the esoteric (tantric) aspects of the goddess is discernible in the Bengali poet Ramprasad Sen's (1718–1775) exploration of this visual image:

Her loins are exquisite, and Her thighs  
streaming with blood  
bring to mind  
sturdy banana plant stalks . . .  
With the fairest of hands  
She grasps a sword and severed head on the left,  
and promises boons and protection on the right . . .  
What could be more amazing?  
The Beautiful One beautifies Herself  
with heads<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, when Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1769–1821) scolds Kali, he infuses the fierce goddess with features of her more benevolent and maternal alter egos:<sup>60</sup>

She has let down Her hair,  
Thrown off Her clothes,  
strung human heads around Her waist,  
and taken a sword in Her hand.  
Her face sparkles  
from the reflection of Her teeth,  
and Her tongue lolls out.  
The smile on that moon-face drips heaps and heaps  
of nectar.<sup>61</sup>

Does this heady vision illumine Kali's face, radiating the same golden hue as Radha's moon face on the *kantha* (see fig. 4.24)?<sup>62</sup>

These Shakta poets most often sing in the voice of a child thanking, blaming, chiding, coaxing, or cajoling its mother (or, in this case, the mother goddess Kali). They engage her with the same intimacy and intensity with which the Vaishnavas had embraced Krishna and his dalliance with Radha. The deeply entangled relationship with a mother who is often arbitrary, negligent, or even deliberately cruel, is evoked repeatedly:

Prasad says, Ma,  
How much more can I say?

I'll take Your blows  
And I won't fight back.  
But nor will I stop  
Calling "Kali!"<sup>63</sup>

But the child also asserts himself against such unfair treatment, sometimes railing and threatening her:

I'll devour you now Kali.  
I'll decide once and for all  
whether you eat me or I eat you.  
I'll make a vegetable curry of your two companions,  
Dakini and Jogini.  
I'll snatch away your garland of skulls  
and make a chutney of it.<sup>64</sup>

These songs, and the sentiment they articulate, are powerfully felt to this day, embedded in women's daily prayers, sung at temples, and blared through loudspeakers of the temporary pavilions erected in downtown Calcutta for the autumnal festival celebrating Kali.

The humanization of Kali from the eighteenth century on in Bengal may also have earlier models in the intense devotion toward regional goddesses such as Manasa and Chandi. These conflicts and reconciliations are described in *mangalkabya*, long narrative poems (*kabya*) associated with the establishment, power, auspiciousness (*mangal*), and worship of these deities, which were enacted in courtly performances, temple rituals, and domestic worship practices and which survive in literary works from the fifteenth century onward.<sup>65</sup> Stories from the *mangalkabya* are illustrated in many of the visual arts. Indeed, it is important to recognize this wealth of local narratives to avoid interpreting motifs based on superficial similarities to extraregional or pan-Indic/Sanskritic imagery, or as "mere" scenes from everyday life. The women who made these *kanthas* would likely have heard and known these stories throughout their lives, and they are as popular in Bengal today as they were a century ago. Told by grandmothers, mothers, or nursemaids; performed by itinerant storytellers and now on television and in movies; pictured on temple walls and in popular prints and paintings; recited, sung, and written—they were and are inextricably woven into the fabric of Bengali life on both sides of the national divide.



One of the most popular of the *mangalkabya* is the *Manasamangal*, which in its many versions tells how the snake goddess Manasa acquired her following in the region. Like the transfigured Kali, she is both benign (she protects from snakebites) and callous and vindictive (she unleashes her snakes and inflicts deadly venom). The best-remembered episode today is that of Behula, who heroically confronts the goddess to reverse her fate when her husband's death leaves her a widow. That episode is narrated, in abbreviated form, in the only dated (1875) kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 11). Behula was married to Lakhindar, the youngest and only surviving son of the wealthy merchant Chand Sadagar, a devotee of Shiva who refused to acknowledge Manasa. Outraged by his indifference, the goddess wrecked his ships in stormy waters, killed six of his sons, and left him destitute, to wander his way back home. However, Chand remained steadfast in his resistance to the goddess. Anticipating her ire, when the marriage of his last son was arranged, he took extra precaution and had an iron house constructed for the couple's protection on their wedding night (fig. 4.26). To make it impenetrable, the structure was elevated and could only be accessed by a ladder. On this kantha, as on *patas*, the iron house takes the form of an elite colonial residence with multiple rooms and elaborate arched windows (fig. 4.27). The wily deity, however, bribed the architect into leaving a tiny hole through which her snakes could reach the newlyweds. In the image on the kantha, a snake crawls down from the roof, searching for that opening. Despite Behula's vigil, during which she kills the first two poisonous snakes sent by Manasa, a third evades her and bites Lakhindar, leaving her in the unenviable position of a young widow. The figure in the house may be Behula killing one of these snakes, distinguished in red thread from her body, or it may be Lakhindar, bitten by the snake.<sup>66</sup>

Rather than relinquishing her husband's body to the fire, the determined Behula sets off down the river with his corpse on a raft, determined to restore his life and thereby reverse her lot.<sup>67</sup> Her loving devotion and her determination in the face of travails on this journey—defending her husband's body from aquatic creatures and herself from lascivious men—

are upheld as a model for young brides, sung by the *patuas* and celebrated in the *brata* rituals performed by women.<sup>68</sup> Behula is ultimately rewarded when she reaches the court of the gods, where she dances for them. Pleased by the entertainment, Shiva negotiates on her behalf with Manasa, who consents to restore Behula's husband and his brothers to life. In return, Behula convinces her obdurate father-in-law to worship Manasa, although he still insists on keeping his back turned toward the goddess.<sup>69</sup> Behula's ordeal is not quite over, since her chastity is questioned upon her return, but ultimately she proves herself a paragon of the pure and faithful wife.

This kantha presents the Manasa-Behula story on either side of a vignette from the *Ramayana*. On one side, the divine hero Rama and his recently rescued wife Sita are enthroned with the monkeys below them (see fig. 4.26). To their right is the house of iron, with snakes slithering to either side, trying to gain entry. Between these motifs, to the immediate left of the house, is a horseman being chased by a large snake, possibly depicting one of the many forms of havoc wrought by Manasa. Around the corner on the kantha (to the left of Rama and Sita), two enormous snakes encircle a water pot. This image likely represents the establishment of Manasa worship, and perhaps the practice of leaving milk at the threshold of the house during the rainy season, when poisonous snakes are particularly plentiful. By propitiating Manasa and satisfying her snakes, the milk is believed to avert attention from the household inside. The lotus plants at the corners of this quilt seem to reinforce Manasa's identity as Padma (another word for lotus). Manasa received the epithet Padma from the circumstances of her birth. After the god Shiva ejaculated onto a lotus leaf in a pond, his semen sank into the watery realm of the snakes. There it produced the girl, Manasa-Padma, who was then fostered by the snakes. The wavy tendrils with buds at their tips evoke the plants drifting on Bengal's tranquil ponds.

The juxtaposition of these two familiar narratives of Manasa and Rama invites us to compare the female roles performed by Behula and Sita. Both women are considered paragons of virtue for their perseverance and unswerving dedication to their





husbands through many ordeals.<sup>70</sup> And like Sita, Behula's chastity is questioned upon her return, despite the success of her mission. Yet, it is Behula who displays greater agency. Sita is represented here as Rama's consort, seated to his left, above his monkey supporters. Their complementary coloring—the figure of Rama outlined in red and filled in green, and Sita outlined in green and filled in red running stitches—perhaps suggests this intertwining of identities and her dependence upon him. (In another part of the same kantha, Sita appears again, this time as a helpless victim, trapped in the demon Ravana's chariot.) Sita needs Rama's protection. His martial skills are displayed in the bow and arrow in his left hand, and likely in the battle along the right edge of the kantha. In contrast, Behula defies social convention and takes her fate into her own hands. Using Shiva as mediator, she negotiates with Manasa to accomplish her goal. Rather than being rescued by her husband, Behula is his protector and savior. She tries to ward off the snakes in the iron house, chases water creatures away from his body during the river journey, and ultimately achieves his revivification, thereby retaining her auspicious marital status.<sup>71</sup>

Prominently embroidered between Sita and Behula's iron house is the year 1282 B.S. (1875). It therefore offers a rare opportunity to place this fascinating statement on the complexity of women's roles



in the larger historical moment of its making. We do not know whether the woman who conceived and stitched this kantha was urban or rural, middle or lower class, educated by colonial missionaries, or explicitly informed by the political debates of the day.<sup>72</sup> Even so, the secure dating allows us to juxtapose these images of women's roles, as imagined by a woman herself, with what has become termed the "women's question" by scholars of colonial South Asia. The position of the Bengali woman was a

Fig. 4.26. Detail of plate 11 with inscribed date, the elevated iron house (right), enthroned Rama and Sita (left), and Manasa embodied as a pot with snakes (upper left)

Fig. 4.27. Colonial building at Kali Ghat, Calcutta, c. mid-nineteenth century. Photograph courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



central component in the formulations of nationalist ideology, primarily by men, in the late nineteenth century. In the public debates, the image of the Bengali woman was conflated with the home (*ghar*) as repository of the essential spirituality of the nation, untainted by both the oppression of the colonizers and the material pursuits undertaken by men in the external domain (*bahir*).<sup>73</sup> Reform movements called for women to acquire the cultural sophistication associated with missionary education and modernity, but without jeopardizing their position at home.<sup>74</sup> The writings of elite educated women from this period give us glimpses of how they experimented with and embraced the signifiers of this image, from attire to food, from social conduct to worship practices, and also attempted to address and reconcile personal conflicts in the process.<sup>75</sup> The date of the kantha alerts us to the question of if, and how, Behula and Sita may have served as paradigms of femininity in this highly political refashioning, which, in less overt ways, gradually percolated beyond the minority of educated elite women into the everyday lives and self-perceptions of women of various social strata. Could the figures of Sita and Behula embody the nationalist valorization of duty and devotion in the construction of the new Bengali woman? Can we read Behula's bold, even transgressive stride beyond the confines of the home in relation to the experimental reconfigurations of the boundaries of the domestic?<sup>76</sup>

The third female figure in this kantha is Manasa herself, represented via her ritual water pot. Although divine, Manasa is as much the victim of an invidious fate as are Behula and Sita. Lusted after by her father Shiva, who fails to recognize her as his daughter, Manasa is blinded by his jealous wife, Parvati. Manasa is neither acknowledged by the gods nor revered on earth. She struggles for the authority so easily assumed by Shiva, who is represented on this kantha by a *linga* at each interior corner (see fig. 4.26). In marked contrast with both Behula's determined quest and Sita's passive endurance, Manasa asserts herself by relentlessly inflicting cruelty. When Manasa finally achieves the veneration she demands, she is worshiped in the form of the single water pot. The depiction of Manasa's snake-framed pot on this kantha

reflects that of Shiva's snake-framed *lingas*, perhaps to suggest some of the parity that Manasa seeks. However, this juxtaposition of motifs surely also asks us to contemplate the complexities of the relationship between these two, a relationship elaborated in other visual and oral performance contexts in Bengal.

Another goddess whose story is told in *mangal-kabya* poems is Chandi, who shares Manasa's struggle for legitimacy and acceptance among Shiva's followers.<sup>77</sup> The Kamalekamini (Lady on the Lotus) episode of the *Chandimangal*, given visual form on kanthas, *patas*, and prints, resonates particularly with the Behula narrative and is seen on two kanthas in the Kramrisch Collection, one square and one rectangular (see plates 3, 4). Like Chand Sadagar in the *Manasamangal*, Dhanapati is a successful merchant who resists the worship of a goddess, in this case Chandi, and is brought into submission by her. On a trading voyage to Sri Lanka, Dhanapati has a wondrous vision of a lotus rising from the water. On it is seated the goddess Chandi, both consuming and emitting elephants (fig. 4.28). When Dhanapati recounts this vision to the Sri Lankan king, who is also his trading partner, the king demands verification. Dhanapati attempts to conjure the image, but the goddess will not cooperate, and the king, outraged at the merchant's apparent fabrication, throws him in prison. While Dhanapati is away serving his sentence in Sri Lanka, his wife, Khullana, gives birth to a son, Srimanta. Like his mother, the boy grows up worshipping the goddess. When he is old enough, Srimanta sets off to find his father. On the journey, he too has a vision of the goddess floating on the water, the scene depicted in the square kantha (fig. 4.29).<sup>78</sup> That the man pointing a finger is Srimanta rather than Dhanapati is suggested by the large water pot placed just behind him on the boat, indicating his ritual invocation of the goddess.<sup>79</sup> Like his father, Srimanta then describes the sight to the king. But since Srimanta is Chandi's devotee, when he conjures her to substantiate his claim, the goddess appears. The king rewards Srimanta with the release of Dhanapati and even gives him the Sri Lankan princess as his bride.

On the similar scene depicted on the rectangular kantha (see fig. 4.28), a figure that may be either Dhanapati or Srimanta points over the head of the pea-



cock prow of his boat toward the four-armed goddess. She balances on a flower with an elephant by her side.<sup>80</sup> Behind the stern of the boat, Shiva, identifiable by his matted locks and snake garlands, sits cross-legged in meditation on his bull. By locating Shiva and Chandi on either side of the boat, the maker of this kantha may be suggesting that Chandi has achieved a status equivalent to that of Shiva. If we follow the orientation of the *mayurpankhi*, with its peacock prow toward Chandi, and its *makara* (a mythical figure combining a fish with a crocodile) stern adjacent to Shiva, the alignment can be interpreted as a redirection of Shiva's following to the goddess. Likewise the square kantha displays Shiva's presence in the form of the enshrined *lingas* (see plate 3; fig. 1.26).

The representations of Chandi on these kanthas share elements with those of other female deities in the region. On the rectangular kantha, Chandi stands atop the lotus with one leg crossed in front of the other. The depiction shares a general similarity with images of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, who is often shown standing in this posture, similarly balanced on an elaborate lotus blossom that arises from a plant whose stalks, buds, and leaves frame her.<sup>81</sup> With her four arms and the elephant at her side, this Chandi is also analogous to Gajalakshmi, the form of Lakshmi lustrated by elephants, their raised trunks framing her (see plates 36, 62). On the scene in the square kantha (see fig. 4.29), Chandi embraces an elephant-headed figure with a human body that is not unlike Ganesha, the god of auspicious beginnings who is often depicted in clay figurines and other popular imagery as a baby in the arms of his mother, Parvati, and father, Shiva (fig. 4.30).<sup>82</sup> Thus Chandi on this kantha is made to closely resemble Parvati in her role as mother.<sup>83</sup> Endowing Chandi, a local goddess with ancient roots and a strong following in Bengal, with these physical attributes of pan-Indic goddesses whose roles she sometimes shared<sup>84</sup> may have been part of a strategy to identify her with these more widely venerated figures. And conversely, association with Chandi would have extended the sphere of influence of the pan-Indic goddesses in Bengal.

On the rectangular kantha (see plate 4), the Kamalekamini episode is placed near the depiction



Fig. 4.28. Detail of plate 4 showing Dhanapati's vision of the goddess Chandi

Fig. 4.29. Detail of plate 3 showing Srimanta's vision of Chandi

Fig. 4.30. Shiva, Parvati, and Ganesha. Kalighat painting, 1854–55. Watercolor on paper, 17½ x 11 inches (44 x 28 cm). Photograph courtesy British Library Board, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, London





Fig. 4.31. Detail of plate 9 showing Durga as a clay icon

of Durga on her lion, suggesting a relationship between Chandi and the Great Goddess. Durga is located on the inner section of the kantha, above the boat, perhaps indicating her higher standing. Their relative positions can also be read as a reference to the *Devi Mahatmya*, the origin narrative of Durga. The Bengali version of this text is recited annually in conjunction with worship of the deity and reminds us that the other goddesses emerged from Durga's fiery martial form to assist her in her various missions.<sup>85</sup> Her more martial aspect, Rana Chandi, for example, is associated with victory in battle. The compositional choices made on this kantha introduce further complexities because Durga not only is presented in her independent warrior form, but is also paired with Shiva. This relationship with Shiva is a second dimension of Durga's identity, and the one to which Chandi aspired.<sup>86</sup>

By establishing visual connections between Chandi and goddesses such as Lakshmi and Parvati/Durga through their shared features and physical proximity, does the embroiderer actively seek to bring Chandi nearer to her goals of attaining a closer relationship with Shiva—the father and husband, respectively, of those two goddesses—and acquiring the dominant status that Shiva enjoys? In another

episode from the *Chandimangal*, Chandi is presented as a forest deity seeking to extend her reach to an urban patronage through her followers, the hunter Kalketu and his wife Phullara.<sup>87</sup> Could we take a step further and interpret the positioning of the Kamalekamini episode on the rectangular kantha between glimpses of cosmopolitan pleasures—on one side a couple on a boat ride holding hands and imbibing from a hookah, on the other a woman playing a violin for a man—as an articulation of Chandi's desire for the urban elite patron community that such figures represented?

Like Shiva, Durga easily assumed the authority and adoration sought by Chandi and Manasa. She enjoyed lavish patronage among Calcutta's urban elite in the nineteenth century, and Durga Puja, the autumnal festival dedicated to her, continues to be the most popular celebration in West Bengal. One Kramrisch kantha depicts Durga as a clay icon modeled for this festival (fig. 4.31; see also fig. 1.23). The ten-armed goddess battles the demon Mahisha, whom she tramples with one foot, while using the other foot to balance on her mount, here depicted as a striped Bengal tiger. The swirl of her raised yellow arms expresses the fiery energy emanating from her, reminding us that she was formed by an accretion of the forces of all the male gods for the purpose of vanquishing this seemingly invincible demon. Her frontal gaze, turned away from the violent struggle below, suggests the ease with which she destroys him. In this vision, Durga is decidedly martial, but she is also the mother goddess, accompanied here by her four children. The goddess Lakshmi and the elephant-headed Ganesha stand to her right; the white-skinned goddess Saraswati and the god Karttikeya, mounted on his peacock, offset them on the left. While Ganesha and Karttikeya are seen as her sons in the larger pan-Indic tradition, only in Bengal are the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati also considered her progeny, accentuating Durga's importance in the region. The whole composition is contained within an arch, just as a structural bamboo frame (*chalachitra*) would have supported and surrounded the oversized clay tableau set on an elevated platform in a festival pavilion.

Above Durga's tall, pointed headgear is a diminutive representation of her husband, Shiva, seated on





his bull. His minimal presence reminds us that she is a married goddess, but also establishes the context for the festival, which celebrates her time away from him.<sup>88</sup> Shiva, in the account told at Durga Puja, is not only a great ascetic, but also a hemp-smoking, financially irresponsible, ever-straying husband who causes his wife much heartache. The festival gives her a break from him and from the trials of her daily life. Each year she departs from their snowy home in the Himalayas to visit her natal home in Bengal, just as every young Bengali wife makes an annual visit to her parents, to be indulged and adored as only married daughters are. During Durga Puja, Bengali women reverse roles with the goddess. The mother becomes the daughter, the devotee-daughters, her mother. They welcome Durga as a daughter and bless and pamper her for a few days. As she departs, they place an iron bangle on the goddess and anoint her with vermillion powder (*sindur*) before sending her back to her husband with a new sari, sweets, and *pan*. The women also smear the vermillion powder on their own iron marriage bangles and on each others' foreheads (a rite called *sindurkhela*), thereby renewing their auspicious married state and blessing one another as well (fig. 4.32). As the clay goddess departs—carried away for her ritual destruction in

the river—the women weep at the loss of their daughter, just as their mothers wept for them, and just as Bengali mothers weep today when a daughter is first dispatched to her in-laws' home.

By referring to the traditional composition for clay icons, with all the deity figures contained within a single frame (see fig. 1.23), this *kantha* points to the importance accorded to Durga Puja in nineteenth-century Bengal. Although the earliest recorded festivals date from the beginning of the seventeenth century, by the mid-nineteenth century the autumn celebration of the goddess had emerged as the region's dominant festival.<sup>89</sup> It was a significant marker of Bengali identity, deliberately fostered in the face of the increasing Europeanization of Bengali intellectual and cultural life that occurred after the British went from being merchants to monarchs. Bengali families flocked to Calcutta in the eighteenth century, and some had acquired wealth and status as commercial and legal intermediaries (*diwan*, *banian*, *vakil*, *mut-suddi*) for the English trade. These successful households saw Durga Puja as an opportunity to flaunt their prosperity while preserving their cultural heritage. They sponsored lavish celebrations in their *thakur dalan* (temples enclosed within the domestic compound) and performances in the adjoining *natmandir*

Fig. 4.32. Celebration of last day of Durga Puja, Kolkata, October 2007. Photograph by Prasanta Biswas / Majority World





Fig. 4.33. Detail of plate 73 showing a temporary image of a goddess with *chalachitra* in a *dalan*

Fig. 4.34. Detail of plate 73 with musicians playing *shehnai*

(entertainment halls). Friendly rivalries and distinctive traditions in the celebration of Durga Puja developed in these mansions of North Calcutta.<sup>90</sup> This “*babu*” culture was distinguished by its conspicuous consumption, and such celebrations and family customs contributed to the consolidation of a new aristocracy.<sup>91</sup>

As is still the practice today, families would commission traditional artists from the potter castes (*kumor*) to fashion icons in clay over bamboo frames and *patua* to paint the sun-dried clay figures. These polychromed deities were then dressed in clothes, *shola* (banana pith), and *daker shaj* (colored tinsel), as well as ornaments fashioned by *malakars* (makers of fresh flower garlands). The choices made in adorning the clay icons gradually distinguished family traditions, as well as accommodating the changing

tastes of the times. For example, the lion bearing Durga on the rectangular Kramrisch kantha previously described (see plate 4) takes a distinctively European form that gained circulation as British imperialism was consolidated.<sup>92</sup> Later, as the nationalist movement gathered momentum, and Durga, the mother goddess, became associated with the emergent nation, the demon sometimes took on strikingly English features.<sup>93</sup>

From the second half of the eighteenth century, elite Bengali families lavished resources on the construction of their *thakur dalans*, often embellishing them with marble, granite, gold leaf, stucco friezes, and hand-painted backdrops. An extraordinary kantha in the Bonovitz Collection depicts just such a long *dalan* in detail. A goddess is shown between two pillars at the center, attended by a priest on either side honoring her with raised fly whisks (fig. 4.33). They are assisted by the women of the family on one side and the men on the other. On the border opposite this scene is a row of women each reaching out to the others, perhaps engaged in the final farewell before the clay image is taken away to be submerged in the river (*bisharjan*). This preparation for the goddess's departure is performed exclusively by women, without the mediation of a priest, pointing to their powerful role in Durga Puja as well as in similar but less extensive annual goddess celebrations such as Lakshmi Puja.

A number of kanthas provide images of the various elaborate forms of entertainment that marked another arena for conspicuous consumption at such festivals,<sup>94</sup> giving us further insight into the life of the region and the priorities of the women who embroi-



dered these scenes. On the Bonovitz kantha just discussed (fig. 4.34), musicians play the *shehnai*, a double-reeded wind instrument whose haunting melodies accompanied *pujas*, weddings, and processions. Many other kanthas depict musicians and dancers. Two in the Kramrisch Collection (see plates 4, 5) present elaborate scenes of *babus* being entertained. A scene on the first of these shows a woman holding a violin under the light of chandeliers suspended from the awning of a *shamiana* (decorative tent used for outdoor entertaining), about to play for a gathering of seated men, some relaxing with their hookahs. She is accompanied by male musicians and a group of male and female dancers. On the other kantha, a violinist and two drummers accompany female dancers (*nautch* girls), who perform for a man seated on an elegant Victorian chair, enjoying a hookah as he watches (fig. 4.35).

Such images provide glimpses of the elite urban lifestyle established during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Bengali *babu* is depicted as a wealthy, fashionable man about town, imbibing the pleasures offered by the city and embracing its cosmopolitanism. Artists and writers in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Bengal elucidated and satirized the character of the *babu* across many genres, including Kalighat paintings, novels, and plays.<sup>95</sup> He is caricatured as effete and utterly absorbed in his carousing, oblivious of the financial drain on his estate, employees, and family caused by his extravagances, and indifferent to political foment around him. Both of these kanthas, as well as others in the collections, contain such explicit caricatures as motifs much as they were presented in popular Kalighat paintings. A woman pulls the hair of a crouching man as she shakes a broom over him (see fig. 4.22); a man raises a palm-leaf fan to a woman, attending her as one would serve a deity icon during worship; a *babu* caresses a woman while bestowing jewelry on her. The most elaborate scene (see fig. 3.7) presents him surrounded by three women: one, young and lavishly dressed, perches on his shoulder; another young woman flanks him on the far side; the third woman, older and hunched over her cane, he drags on a leash.<sup>96</sup> These are typically understood to be, respectively, the dominant wife, the mistress, and



the mother (or mother-in-law), thus inverting the traditional hierarchy of respect.

While we know that such stock images of the effeminate Bengali *babu* proliferated in a variety of media during the nineteenth century, we know little about why women chose to stitch these vignettes onto their kanthas. How did they perceive the depicted wives, mothers, mistresses, actresses, dancers, and courtesans? Did their representation on kanthas reinforce the negative image of the “public woman”? Could the kantha makers have shared a sense of alienation with these women in their urban experience? In what ways did their lives and interests intersect? Such depictions invite us to contemplate the ways in which imagery may have affirmed or replicated traditionally formulated understandings about a range of issues, including familial relationships, domesticity, everyday life, ritual performance, ideals of female virtue, and religious values. Did their selection of images offer embroiderers opportunities to reinterpret, innovate, critique, make ambiguous,

Fig. 4.35. Detail of plate 5 showing musicians and dancers performing for a seated *babu*



subvert, destabilize, or even reject conventional beliefs and practices? Can these processes occur simultaneously?

This essay has attempted to underscore some of the distinctive motifs and narratives on the kanthas in these two collections, as well as their arrangement in relation to each other, in order to examine the entry points they provide into the worlds inhabited by their users and makers. Although for the most part we know little about the precise historical moment and conditions of each kantha's creation, the works on display span two centuries of momentous change, when regional identity was continually renegotiated. In examining kantha imagery as glimpses of a range of women's imaginations from an earlier time—what could be conceived and articulated, and what could not—it is critical to keep in mind the tumultuous transitions from colonial rule to the birth of new nations through bloody partitions; the naming and claiming of identities; the bitterly contested mapping of territorial boundaries; and the relocation of bodies, loss of homes, and splitting of families that left their indelible marks on at least three generations. The impact of these upheavals on the everyday lives of the women who stitched kanthas in their homes cannot be underestimated, nor can their refraction of them in the act of embroidering. How are we to understand images of kitchen implements and cosmetics when the contours of the home were themselves at stake? Conversely, how do such images anchor or destabilize the shaping of the region? The divine realm and the narratives of the gods are equally reconstituted in terms of the local. From this perspective, mapping images of goddesses onto the emergent nation, housing gods in the traditional *chala* temple, and seating Krishna in a *mayur-pankhi* are hardly immured from political import. Thus, to begin to discern the efficacy of the depicted images, we must ask about their relation to the shifting formations that multiply constitute and challenge regional identities at particular junctures, as well as their seemingly visual continuities.

## NOTES

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1. Poets such as Ramprasad Sen (1718–1775) take the imagery of the boat ride, ubiquitous across many expressive genres, and locate the goddess at the helm, helping them navigate the turbulences of daily existence:

The world's a shoreless ocean;  
there's no crossing it.  
But I bank on Your feet and the treasure of Your company—  
rescue me, Tarini,  
in my distress.

I see the waves  
The bottomless waters  
and shiver in terror:  
I might drown and die!  
Be merciful,  
save Your servant,  
harbor me now in Your boat  
Your feet.

Translated by Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 179.

2. Roger D. Abrahams, *A Poetics of Vernacular Practices* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 1.
3. The shapes and ornamentation of these cutters allow us to identify the region where they originate. This one and also a second cutter depicted on plate 59 continue to circulate to this day. The material (ranging from silver and brass to cheaper scrap metal) and the lavishness of ornamentation (carved, inlaid, or simply a smooth surface) can yield clues to the social standing of the families owning these objects.
4. *Pan* has long been believed to have healthful as well as aphrodisiac qualities. See, for example, Julia Leslie, "The Significance of Dress for the Orthodox Hindu Woman," in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne Bubolz Eicher (New York: Berg, 1992), pp. 198–213.
5. For a kantha depiction of a wedding scene, see Sila Basak, *Women's Brata Rituals* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006), plate 360. If the Bonovitz kantha (see plate 53) was used for presentation as part of a wedding trousseau, it may have been at the center of a community that gathered around its display, ceremonial transportation from one home to another, presentation, reception, and integration into the second household. Another Bonovitz kantha (see plate 84) may represent a bride with an elaborate veil and sandalwood



designs on her forehead, at the threshold of a mansion with Georgian windows and stained glass lunettes.

6. For a discussion of the relationship of women to priests in Bengali Hindu weddings, see Pika Ghosh, "Household Rituals and Women's Domains," in *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 21–26; and Lina Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982).

7. On the role of *pan* in consolidating relationships between ruler and subject, see David L. Curley, "'Voluntary' Relations and Royal Gifts of Pan in Mughal Bengal," in *Robes of Honour: Khilat in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 50–79.

8. For a study of the integration of architecture and ritual in these temples, see Pika Ghosh, *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). In terms of the wealth of terra-cotta images, various scholars have classified select sets, including Mukul Dey, *Birbhum Terracottas* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1959); Zulekha Haque, *Terracotta Decorations of Late Medieval Bengal: Portrayal of a Society* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1980); David McCutcheon, "Krishnalila on the Temples of Bengal," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, n.s., 7 (1975–76), pp. 33–51; George Michell, ed., *Brick Temples of Bengal: From the Archives of David McCutcheon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Chittaranjan Dasgupta, *Bishnupurera Mandira Terakota* (Bishnupur: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1980); and Nazimuddin Ahmed, *Epic Stories in Terracotta* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1990).

9. These monuments are particularly useful because most are dated by their dedicatory inscriptions. A valuable source for this epigraphic information is A. K. Bhattacharyya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions from Temples of West Bengal, c. 1500 A.D. to c. 1800 A.D.* (Calcutta: Nabhana, 1982).

10. The Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta, the Gurusaday Museum, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art have significant holdings of the earliest scrolls, although these date no earlier than the eighteenth century. For illustrations, see Robert Skelton and Mark Francis, eds., *Arts of Bengal: The Heritage of Bangladesh and Eastern India* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979); and Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968). See also John Irwin, "Indo-Portuguese Embroideries of Bengal," *Journal of the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society* 26, no. 2 (1956), pp. 65–73.

11. Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

12. Kalighat paintings, as reflected in the name, were created predominantly, although not exclusively, in the Kali Temple area, on the bank of the Buri Ganga in South Calcutta, from about the 1830s to the 1930s. These inexpensive pictures, executed with swift brushstrokes on cheap mill-made paper, were sold as pilgrimage and tourist souvenirs in shops and temporary stalls lining the alleys of the Kalighat area, and also provided ornaments for home display, or (when consecrated to embody the depicted deity) images for worship in home altars. Despite its derivation from the famous Hindu temple, the painting tradition was diverse enough in its repertoire to include subjects from other religious and nonreligious contexts. Popular Islamic images include the prophets and angels, and *taziyas* (models of the tombs of Hasan and Husain at Kerbala) for Muharram (a Shiite Muslim festival). In the 1920s, these works were appreciated by Bengali intellectuals and Europeans for their spontaneity, bold coloring, elegant lines, and visual analogies to Western modernism (e.g., Matisse), and the genre was gradually classified as art (see Katherine Hacker, "Living Traditions," this volume).

13. Metal stamps in the form of paired feet were used by Krishna worshipers to imprint the image with sandalwood on their bodies. Nineteenth-century examples in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum have inscriptions that explicitly associate them with Radha and Krishna. I.S. 04614B bears the Bengali words *Sri Sri Radha Krishna*. For an illustration, see Skelton and Francis, *Arts of Bengal*, p. 62.

14. On the cultural dimensions of these settlement processes and the role of *pirs*, see Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); and M. R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965).

15. The movement gets its name from Gaud (Gaur), the sixteenth-century capital of the independent Sultanate of Bengal. This community dedicated to the worship of Krishna/Vishnu is thereby distinguished by its Bengali roots from other contemporary developments in North India such as the Pushti Margis, Radha Vallabhis, and Nimbarkis. For overviews of the *bhakti* tradition that coalesced under Chaitanya, see Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961); Melville T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981); Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal 1486–1900* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985); Edward C. Dimock, *Chaitanya Caritamrita of Krishnadasa Kaviraja: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. Tony K. Stewart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

16. A longstanding practice of listening to Krishna's exploits had already been established, as the tenth-century *Bhagavata*



*Purana*, a text embraced as divine revelation by this community, indicates: "The stories of Lord Krishna are meritorious, sweet, ever-interesting, delightful and they wipe out the sins of the world. What person who knows the importance of listening to them, will be sated at hearing them" (10.51.20). Like most Puranic literature, this work is in fact framed as a series of stories recounted by a designated narrator to a specific listener, interspersed with observations and digressions that remind us of the oral performative contexts in which such works were transmitted. The version cited in this essay is Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare, ed., *Bhagavata Purana*, translated and annotated in J. L. Shastri, ed., *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, vol. 10 (1978; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994).

17. This practice continues into the present, and descriptions of *nagar samkirtan* have been documented by several scholars of Bengal including Ralph Nicholas's study on a Bengali village in Midnapore District, "Vaisnavism and Islam in Rural Bengal," in *Bengal Regional Identity*, ed. David Kopf (East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1969), p. 34. Among the histories of Bengali *kirtan*, I have found particularly useful Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences and K. P. Bagchi, 1989).

18. Radha's origins and her relationship to Krishna as explored in Gaudiya and earlier Vaishnava texts has been discussed at length by several scholars, including Sasibhusan Dasgupta, *Sriradhar Kramabikasa* (Calcutta: E. Mukherji, 1953); De, *Early History*; J. A. B. Van Buitenen, "On the Archaism of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*," in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton B. Singer (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966), pp. 3–40; Charlotte Vaudeville, "Evolution of Love-Symbolism in Bhagavatism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82 (1962), pp. 31–40; Sumanta Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk-Heroine: Radha in Mediaeval Bengali Vaishnavite Culture* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993); Norvin Hein, *The Miracle Plays of Mathura* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 163–271; A. K. Majumdar, "A Note on the Development of the Radha Cult," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Institute* 36 (1955), pp. 231–57; Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977; First Indian Edition Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), pp. 26–37.

19. For example, Maladhar Basu translated the tenth and eleventh sections as *Sri Krishna Vijay* in 1480, followed by Madhavacharya's *Sri Krishna Mangal* and Sankar Kavindra Chandra's *Govinda Mangal*.

20. Historians of Bengali literature generally agree that the medieval poet Krittibas Ojha was probably the first to retell the *Ramayana* in Bengali. J. C. Ghosh calls him "the father of Bengali poetry" (*Bengali Literature* [London: Oxford University Press, 1948], p. 35); Dinesh Chandra Sen declares the work "the

Bible of the people of the Gangetic Valley" (*The History of the Bengali Language and Literature* [Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1911]; see also Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Bengali Ramayanas* [Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1920]). Here I have used Asutosh Bhattacharya, ed., *Krittibasi Ramayana* (Calcutta: Akhil Bharat Janashiksha Prachar Samiti, 1970), and *Ramayana*, trans. Shudha Mazumdar (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1974). On versions of the *Ramayana* from eastern India, see also Asutosh Bhattacharya, "Oral Tradition of the Ramayana in Bengal," in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. V. Raghavan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), pp. 593–616; Asit K. Banerjee, ed., *The Ramayana in Eastern India* (Calcutta: Prajna, 1983); W. L. Smith, *Ramayana Traditions in Eastern India*, 2d ed. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994).

21. An offering of 108 blue lotus blossoms was required for Rama to win the goddess's favor because they were rare, beautiful, and almost unattainable, even by the gods. The monkey Hanuman was dispatched to obtain these flowers from the remote and inaccessible Devi Lake. When Rama offered Durga the flowers, however, he realized that the last of the 108 blossoms was missing. Hanuman insisted on having counted them, and there were no more in the lake. In desperation, Rama prepared to offer the goddess his blue eye, arguing that his eyes resemble lotus flowers. Satisfied with his intention, Durga appeared, stopped him from removing his eye, and assured him of victory. He then proceeded to attack Ravana and, with Durga's support, won the war.

22. The poets Jayadeva, Chandidas, and Vidyapati remind us frequently of this succession of incarnations, often embedded in assertions of Krishna's ultimately divine nature as he demands Radha's affections. Here I have used the following translations: Baru Chandidas, *Singing the Glory of Lord Krishna: The Srikrnakirtana*, trans. Miriam H. Klaiman (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); *Love Songs of Vidyapati*, trans. Deben Bhattacharya, ed. W. G. Archer (New York: Grove Press, 1970); and *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

23. These boats were depicted and discussed by European travelers from the late eighteenth century, including Balthazar Solvyns and William Hodges, *Travels in India, during the years 1780, 1781, 1782 & 1783* (London: J. Edwards, 1793), p. 40. By the nineteenth century, the *mayurpankhi* and *bajra* were especially valorized in the literary outpouring of Bengali poets and novelists such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. On maritime vessels prevalent in this period, see Jeanne Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 2: *Water Transportation* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a discussion and depiction of boat types in Bengal, see Robert L. Hardgrave, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).



24. *Patua* songs describe her rallying the women for the journey to the market, and setting up Krishna's meetings with Radha on the way (*Barai Burir Jatra*). See, for example, the song of Panchanan Chitrakar of Panuari, in Gurusaday Dutt, *Patua Sangit* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1939), p. 21.

25. Most scholars date this text to the tenth century and ascribe a South Indian origin. See J. N. Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 232; J. A. B. Van Buitenen, "On the Archaism of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*," in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton B. Singer (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966); De, *Early History*, p. 6. On the Alvar devotional literary context in which this text is believed to have originated, see Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

26. For early collections of *patua* songs, I have relied primarily on Dutt, *Patua Sangit*.

27. *Srikrishnakirtan*, Naukakhanda, song 12.

28. Song of Panchanan Chitrakar of Panuari, Dutt, *Patua Sangit*, p. 22 (my translation).

29. Cited in Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989), p. 96.

30. Kaliprasanna Sinha, *Hutom Penchar Naksha* (1868; reprint, Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977), pp. 38, 98. For a discussion, see Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, p. 96.

31. *Love Songs of Vidyāpati*, p. 133.

32. As Edward Dimock has pointed out, there is an element of self-sacrifice: "only when the heart is given unconditionally . . . is such love pure and thus efficacious"; Dimock, "Bhakti," in *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 29.

33. For other examples of such conflation of the two episodes, see plates 2 and 37 in this catalogue. The nineteenth-century print in the British Museum's collection (see fig. 4.10) also identifies the scene as *danakhanda*. See T. Richard Burton, *Bengali Myths* (London: The British Museum Press, 2006), p. 57.

34. *Srikrishnakirtan*, Danakhanda, song 72.

35. *Ibid.*, song 39.

36. *Ibid.*, song 104.

37. On markets as sites of cultural interaction in Bengal, see, for example, Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). For a kantha depiction of a market scene, see plate 84 of this catalogue, where women with baskets approach a man who displays his scale.

38. Edward C. Dimock and Denise Levertov, *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. viii.

39. Another such episode is the *bharkhanda*, where Radha has Krishna carry her goods to the market, promising favors in exchange. However, she later gives him the slip, choosing to return on a different path.

40. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin has pointed to similar balance and reciprocity issues in Radha and Krishna's love affair in the *Gitagovinda*. Apffel-Marglin reads the first part of the poem as a sexual union in which the male is the active partner. In the middle section she finds the symmetry of both partners expressed in their pangs of separation. In the last portion Radha performs an "inverse sexual union" in which she is the dominant partner. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, "Types of Sexual Union and the Implicit Meanings," in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), pp. 298–315. For a terra-cotta depiction of such balances of power, see Pika Ghosh, "Narrating Krishna's Biography: Temple Imagery, Oral Performance and Vaishnava Mission in Seventeenth-Century Bengal," *Artibus Asiae* 65, no. 1 (2005), pp. 39–65.

41. See Ashit Paul, ed., *Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), p. 46. This print identifies the figures by name. To the left, holding the baby, is Ruhini (probably Rohini, his father's second wife); next is Yashoda, his mother, followed by her companions Duti, Lalita, and Vishakha.

42. The form of the crawling baby with a sweet in his hand graces altars in homes and temples and is worshiped as Nadu Gopal (the boy who steals coconut and jaggery balls). See, for example, Meister, ed., *Cooking for the Gods*, p. 49.

43. Gaudiya texts such as the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, the last of the major biographies of the founder of this religious community, explain the set of eight females as extensions of Radha's body and emanations of her emotional states (delight, humility, anger, madness, anxiety, inconsistency, dejection, and restraint). Her body parts and aspects are thus visualized in the form of her closest female companions. Krishna then embraces each as an embodiment of Radha herself, enjoying the range of her emotions and physical attributes. See Dimock, *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.8.126, 135.

44. This parallels the practice termed *manjari sadhana*, in which the devotee is transformed through meditation, with the aid of visual and mental imagery, and takes the role of servant to participate in the gods' play. Emulating and ultimately identifying completely with these privileged characters in the divine union not only allows the practitioner to serve the gods but also to have direct access to them and to witness the divine union. Devotees may develop individual roles in the divine drama and gradually transcend their material reality and external bodies to inhabit the true or perfected body (*siddha-deha*).



These techniques have been discussed by David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Rāganugā Bhakti Sādhanā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 65–81. See also June McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Gary B. Palmer and William R. Jankowiak, "Performance and Imagination: Toward an Anthropology of the Spectacular and the Mundane," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (May 1996), pp. 225–58.

45. Mystical visions involving the activation of icons were often experienced by devotees during worship. The seventeenth-century Gaudiya text *Premvilās*, for example, records Srinivas Acharya lingering at a temple after the evening service and witnessing Radha dance for her beloved; in her frenzy, she loses an anklet, which the devotee receives as his reward. For a discussion of this episode in relation to temple icons and practices, see Pika Ghosh, "Swayed by Love: Dance in the Vaishnava Temple Imagery of Bengal," in *Dance Matters*, ed. Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta (London and New Delhi: Routledge, forthcoming).

46. Sumanta Banerjee points to the resonances between conceptualizations of Radha's experience and those of women in Kolkata by comparing Dinabandhu Mitra's descriptions in *Sadhabar Ekadoshi* to Horu Thakur's songs about the divine love affair. See Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2002), p. 99.

47. For examples, see Michell, ed., *Brick Temples of Bengal*, pp. 45–47, plates J1a–c.

48. The characteristic curve of the roof, resulting from the sag of bamboo, had been made permanent in the region's Sultanate-period brick mosques, shrines, and mausolea from the fifteenth-century Eklakhi tomb at Hazrat Pandua. It was even more pronounced in the many Hindu temple constructions that survive from the seventeenth century. Simultaneously, the imperial Mughals appropriated the feature after the conquest of the region, flaunting it as the *bangala* in marble at Agra Fort and the throne in the Hall of Public Audience at Shahjahanabad (Red Fort, Delhi).

49. The Tarakeshwar Temple scandal of the 1870s gained significant currency in literary works, plays performed on the Calcutta stage, and in sets of single-scene Kalighat paintings. Tanika Sarkar has examined how and why this scandal captured the imagination in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 53–94. For a discussion of the prints based on the scandal, see Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1999), pp. 127–38, plate 128. See also Paul, ed., *Woodcut Prints*, p. 42, plate 30.

50. For discussions of Ratha Yatra at the Puri Jagannatha Temple, see Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, eds., *The Cult of Jagannatha and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (Delhi: Manohar, 1978); and

Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (1985; reprint, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Katherine F. Hacker, "Dressing the Lord Jagannatha in Silk: Cloth, Clothes, and Status," *RES Anthropology and Aesthetics* 32 (Autumn 1997), pp. 107–24.

51. Over time temples added sets of four miniature temple forms to the corners, and thereby gained height. At Kalna in Bardhaman District, the eighteenth-century Krishna temple to Lalji, for example, is ornamented with twenty-five. The Shiva temple embroidered on plate 31 displays such embellishment.

52. On this architectural feature, see Pika Ghosh, "Space and the New Temple Vernacular of Seventeenth-Century Bengal," in *Traditional and Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Subashree Krishnaswamy (Chennai: Madras Craft Foundation, 2003), pp. 16–30.

53. This reading was suggested by Stella Kramrisch in her 1939 essay "Kanthā," reproduced in this volume.

54. Krishna is also called Shyam, and Kali is often Shyama.

55. Radha is usually described as golden-skinned in the devotional songs.

56. See, for example, the Kalighat painting in the Herwitz collection, reproduced in Jain, *Kalighat Painting*, p. 209.

57. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, the earliest full textual articulation of the goddesses, she was imagined as the personification of Durga's anger, created to assist Durga in her task of destroying the demons Shumbha and Nishumbha. Emerging from her forehead as Durga faced their generals, Chanda and Munda, on the battlefield, Kali swallowed up the demon army and thereby helped ensure victory for Durga and the male gods who had sought her assistance.

58. On the *bhakti* refashioning of Kali, see McDermott, *Mother of My Heart*.

59. Translated by Rachel Fell McDermott, in *ibid.*, p. 181.

60. The modification is accomplished in part by drawing on stock Sanskrit similes for the body parts of beautiful young women, such as thighs like plantains and a face like a smiling moon, which would have been familiar from descriptions of Radha in Vaishnava contexts. For a careful analysis of these elements, see *ibid.*, chap. 6.

61. Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, translated and cited in *ibid.*, p. 207.

62. Ramprasad Sen, translated and cited in *ibid.*, p. 206:

Is my black Mother Syama really black?  
People say Kali is black,  
but my heart doesn't agree.  
If She's black,  
how can She light up the world?  
Sometimes my Mother is white,  
sometimes yellow, blue and red.  
I cannot fathom Her.  
My whole life has passed trying . . .

And in post-Ramprasad Bengal, her coloring is examined and reinterpreted over and over again.



63. Ibid., p. 197.

64. Atulchandra Mukhopadhyay's 1923 song is given in a slightly different form in Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, p. 54.

65. On this genre, see Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangalkabyer Itihas* (1939; reprint, Calcutta: A. Mukherji, 1989). See also Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*, 3d rev. ed. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1979); and Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976). For a discussion of their role in ritual activity, see Edward C. Dimock, Jr., "The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature, Part 1," in *The Sound of Silent Guns and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 150–51. Earlier visual depictions of these deities survive. Manasa, for example, was given form in stone and metal sculpture, and on waterpots during the Pala period (eighth to twelfth centuries A.D.). See, for example, Susan L. Huntington, *The "Pala-Sena" Schools of Sculpture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), plate 272.

66. The profile face, with its single, large eye and economy of line, is reminiscent of *jadu patua* portraits of the dead painted by *patuas* for the Santal community to give sight to the recently deceased, who are believed to be wandering blindly until this ritual is performed.

67. *Pata* scrolls devote the majority of their length to the riverine episodes of the Behula story. See, for example, Blurton, *Bengali Myths*, p. 63.

68. Recent scholarship on *brata* rituals in Bengal include Basak, *Women's Brata Rituals*; and June McDaniel, *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

69. A kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 84) also suggests the *Manasamangal*. The figure in the house may be the bride Behula, standing guard against Manasa's snakes at the top of the stairs. The scene in a black square frame to the left may be her ride down the river, teeming with crocodiles, turtles, large fish, and birds, who are probably reaching for her husband's remains in the makeshift banana-bark raft. The steps on the right side of the framed scene may represent either the *ghats* where lurking men called out to her, or where she helped the washerwoman Neto do the laundry of the gods. At the bottom of the square, the woman's distinctive pose, with one leg tantalizingly exposed and arms outstretched, suggests Behula's performance for the gods. (She is often described as Behula *nachni* [dancer].) The waterpot (*ghat*), the typical vessel in which Manasa is invoked, depicted at the bottom left corner, would then point to the establishment of this practice.

70. See, for example, Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 252–76.

71. For a reading of female power in a patriarchal structure in the *Manasamangal*, see Manasi Dasgupta and Mandakranta Bose, "The Goddess-Woman Nexus in Popular Religious Prac-

tice: The Cult of Manasa" in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 148–61.

72. The only other kantha in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections that is securely dated by inscription is a Bonovitz kantha from 1335 B.S. (1928 A.D.) (see plate 63).

73. Partha Chatterjee, for example, has argued that this home/world dichotomy was then extended to social roles to align the nationalist project with modernity (*The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993], pp. 116–34).

74. For discussion of the shifting roles of women during this period, see Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). See also Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal, 1870–1956* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

75. For example, in 1870, Kundamala Debi expressed this ideology: "If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to memsaheb-like behavior. This is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the world would be." Cited in Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, p. 105.

76. The conceptual boundaries of the home shifted as middle-class women began to go to school and take public transportation.

77. The *Chandimangal* consists of three parts: the story of Shiva, Sati, and Parvati; the episode elaborating how Chandi gains the support of the hunter Kalketu and his wife, Phullara; and the Kamalekamini episode about the fate of the merchant Dhanapati. The narrative is often associated with the *Chandimangal* text of Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti. I have used Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kavikankan Birachita Chandī* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993). For an English summary version, see E. B. Cowell, trans., "Three Episodes from an Old Bengali Poem 'Candi,'" *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 71, no. 1 (1902), pp. 1–46. For a careful reading of gender roles in this narrative, see David L. Curley, "Marriage, Honor, Agency and Trials by Ordeal: Women's Gender Roles in Chandimangal," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (May 2001).

78. The composition of the scene on this kantha closely resembles the depiction on a print in British Museum reproduced in Blurton, *Bengali Myths*, p. 67, where it is identified as Srimanta's sighting of the goddess. Both privilege Srimanta with a parasol over his head. A second figure projects to the right from behind him, and below is a cabin with windows. Missing on the kantha is the chair on which Srimanta sits in the print. Butterflies hover around the flowering plant in both (see fig. 4.2).



79. The pot, with what may be a coconut placed atop, shares a distinctive profile of projecting blue lines that are also employed to delineate the goddess's hair. Like the other depictions of the sacred discussed earlier, this stylistic analogy draws attention to the two forms in which the goddess is represented—the anthropomorphic and the more abstract vessel.
80. The visions of both father and son are displayed in Chandi *patas* that I have examined from Noya in Midnapore District, West Bengal.
81. For woodcuts of Lakshmi, see, for example, Paul, ed., *Woodcut Prints*, p. 79, plate 65, and p. 85, plate 72. For a Kalighat painting, see Pika Ghosh, "Kalighat Paintings from Nineteenth-Century Calcutta in Maxwell Sommerville's East Indian Ethnological Collection," *Expedition* 43, no. 2 (2000), pp. 11–20.
82. For comparative images, see Jain, *Kalighat Painting*, plates 72, 73, 139; and Susan S. Bean, *Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail, 1784–1860* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum; Chidambaram, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publications, 2001), plate 11.20.
83. On *Chandimangal patas* prepared in the Midnapore area today, she is conflated with Durga to some extent as the opening scene depicts the martial goddess on her tiger. The verse accompanying this visual presentation, however, identifies her as Chandi.
84. As Mangal Chandi, she is worshiped in a waterpot to bring good luck; as Jai Mangal Chandi, she bestows children; as Sankat Mangal Chandi, she averts danger. For a brief discussion of the different Chandis worshiped today, see McDaniel, *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives*, pp. 9–11.
85. The recitation of the *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptasati* is also called the *Chandi Path*.
86. In another *Chandimangal* episode about her interaction with the hunter Kalketu, she is presented as the unhappy wife of Shiva who is tortured by her co-wives.
87. Aspects of her efforts to consolidate her position may be discernible to this day, as she continues to be worshiped in both the highly localized forms and practices distinctive to particular villages, as well as the more mainstream and widespread Hindu ones officiated by Brahman priests. See, for example, the discussion of the nature of worship and caste participation in Mangal Chandi *puja* in the village of Khairadihi, near Bakreshwar, in R. M. Sarkar, *Regional Cults and Rural Tradition: An Interacting Pattern of Divinity and Humanity in Rural Bengal* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1993). On the larger literary genre of the Puranas as mediating between the authority attributed to Brahmanical tradition and popular local customs, see Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 165–233.
88. Shiva is typically presented only on small calendar paintings or prints, while the large clay tableaux are devoted to Durga.
89. In 1606, Bhabananda, ancestor of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia, celebrated Durga Puja in the Durga *dalan* of their mansion. In 1610, Calcutta's oldest documented Puja was conducted by the Sabarna Choudhuris of Barisha. See Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta, "Durga Puja in Calcutta," in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 2: *The Present and the Future*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 331–36.
90. For example, the Durga Puja of the Shobhabazar family came to acquire precedence so that no other Puja could begin before theirs, which was announced by cannon fire. The first English governor general, Robert Clive, attended the Shobhabazar family's Durga Puja to give thanks for his definitive victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which changed the region's fortunes forever. And not only was the Deb family's *puja* dubbed "Company Puja," but a new trend was thereby established for the English to socialize with their Bengali collaborators, and an occasion was created for cultural interaction. Ramdulal Dey's family worshiped Durga with the ten wisdom goddesses (*dasamahavidyas*). Women of the Pathuriaghata Mallik family dyed the saris for the goddess and embroidered them with gold thread. Gobindaram Mitra of Kumartuli gained the reputation, in the city's oral histories, of wrapping the image of the goddess in gold and silver leaf, and spending fifty thousand rupees on the fortnight-long ceremonies. See Chitra Deb, "The 'Great Houses' of Old Calcutta," in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 1: *The Past*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 56–63; and Chaliha and Gupta, "Durga Puja in Calcutta," pp. 331–36.
91. In 1823, Raja Radhakanta Deb of Shobhabazar prepared a list of twenty-three such Bengalis titled "Respected and Opulent Natives of the 'Presidency' [of Bengal]." In *The Native Aristocracy and Gentry of India* of 1881, Loknath Ghosh cited sixty-nine families. See Deb, "The 'Great Houses' of Old Calcutta," pp. 56–63; Chaliha and Gupta, "Durga Puja in Calcutta," pp. 331–36; and Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978).
92. Durga's son Karttikeya (or Kartika) adopted colonial elements, as suggested in this observation: "During our childhood, the Kartika we saw was quite a handsome young man, with long and curled hair hanging down to his neck, a thin trace of a moustache, dressed in superfine dhoti, a light plaited scarf thrown around his neck and wearing a pair of gold-embroidered shoes. . . . But now, instead of his curly hair hanging down, we find him sporting the Albert fashion of hairstyle; in the place of the gold-embroidered shoes, he wears English shoes and covers his body in a jacket." Cited in Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, p. 129.
93. In the nineteenth century the remote figure of Queen Victoria was imagined as a goddess. Bengali poets, for example,



sang to her in the voice of a hurt child, much as the eighteenth-century devotee Ramprasad Sen had addressed Kali:

Where are you, our mother the Great Queen  
 We have no other shelter but you  
 Mother, we call out to you and we all look up to you  
 For what sort of pleasure have you abandoned us?

Cited in Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 252.

94. Descendants of the city's older families can still recall celebrations when *patuas* sang stories of beloved gods and goddesses to their scrolls. Famous poets were invited to engage in contests (*kobir ladai*) in the courtyards of these mansions on such occasions. *Jatradal* (rural theater companies) came at the invitation of these urban *rajas*.

95. For a related repertoire of Kalighat paintings, see Jain, *Kalighat Painting*, pp. 97–147. Major literary works shaping and commenting on this image of the Bengali *babu* include Bhabani Charan Bandopadhyay's *Naba Babu Bilas*, Tekchand Thakur's *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei ki Bale Shabhyata*.

96. On the colonial processes and practices by which this image of the effeminate Bengali *babu* was constructed, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995). See also Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*; and Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.



ਸਿੱਖਾਂ ਦੇ ਅੰਤਰਿਕ ਸੁਆਸ

ਪ੍ਰਾਣੀ ਸੰਸਾਰ ਦੇ ਅੰਤਰਿਕ  
ਸੁਆਸ ਦੇ ਅੰਤਰਿਕ ਸੁਆਸ  
ਦੇ ਅੰਤਰਿਕ । ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ । ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮ  
ਮੰਤ੍ਰ ਮਾਰਗ ਆਨੰਦ





## Women's Words / Women's Voices in the Kantha

We tend to think that the kantha died out in Bangladesh until its revival in the mid-1980s, but this is not the case. Even when it was not a public object for display as it is today, the kantha continued—and continues—to be made by women who wear cotton saris, especially village women for whom life has often meant sending a son or husband to work in town or on the river and sea as fisherman or boatman. A form of recycling material, the kantha, made of old saris or dhotis, provides both comfort and protection. As Stella Kramrisch notes, “The patchwork quilt, a collection of tatters, guarantees immunity from black magic, protection and security.”<sup>1</sup> The kantha becomes the symbol of the mother or wife—what was worn next to her body becoming her in a metonymic association or magical transformation. In Jasimuddin's poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math*,<sup>2</sup> translated by E. M. Milford as *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*, this association is poignantly made when Rupa recognizes his wife's grave by the quilt placed upon it. Unable to embrace his wife, he wraps the kantha around his body, lies down beside her grave, and dies.

Even though women today do not have the leisure to embroider kanthas as profusely as in the past—except in those instances when they are working for craft shops or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have commissioned kanthas—women sending off loved ones will generally send a quilt sewn with their own hands, and, if they have a little leisure, embroider foliate or floral motifs, all-over patterns, and/or a border.<sup>3</sup> In the Chapinawabganj District of Bangladesh, kanthas are still very much part of the daily lives of people, as a trip in late June 2007 brought home to me. Both Runa and Sabina, a married daughter visiting her mother and an unmarried daughter home from school that day, told me that they embroider kanthas, which they take out for “special guests,” meaning in-laws.<sup>4</sup> Nor were kanthas exclusively the preserve of rural women. In the mid-1970s, when I was doing research on the kantha for what would be the first edition of my book, *The Art of*



*Kantha Embroidery*, I happened to mention my interest in kanthas to a university colleague in the Geography Department. He very readily showed me a kantha *jainamaz*, a prayer rug,<sup>5</sup> made by his mother, Lutfunessa Begum.<sup>6</sup> My colleague was from the town of Bogra in northern Bangladesh, which is not represented in kantha collections in museums. But Lutfunessa Begum's use of different kantha stitches—the kantha *phor*, the *lik*, the *chatai*, the *kaitya*<sup>7</sup>—replicated the way in which nineteenth-century kantha makers played with different stitches, often creating stitches that had no names. When revising my book for the second edition, I happened to mention this piece to another colleague. She told me that her mother, Johura Khatoon, had made a kantha tablecloth.<sup>8</sup>

These pieces were, however, meant for the home, for loved ones to see and treasure, not to be sold in craft shops and boutiques or displayed in drawing rooms and hotel and bank lobbies. In the mid-1980s, the surge of public interest in this form of women's art that arose in Bangladesh transformed what was essentially a domestic, private art into a commercial, public one. Of course, interest in the kantha did not suddenly spring up in the mid-1980s, nor in Bangladesh alone. Rabindranath Tagore in the late nineteenth century and Dinesh Chandra Sen, Gurusaday Dutt, and Stella Kramrisch in the 1920s and 1930s recognized the importance of indigenous art forms and started collecting kanthas. Their interest coincided with the rise of a concerted nationalist movement in Bengal. Apart from the extremists who resorted to violent means, there were also other nationalists like Dutt who adopted more peaceful means, one of which was to boycott foreign goods in favor of *swadeshi*, products of one's own country. Dutt, apart from collecting folk art, was also prominent in his espousal of Bratachari, a movement for spiritual and social improvement that aimed at raising national awareness among the people of India by encouraging traditional culture, especially folk dance and song. The interest of Sen, Dutt, and Kramrisch resulted in numerous publications, but the first significant publication on the kantha was perhaps Jasimuddin's poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math* in 1929. Jasimuddin had worked as a collector for Sen, who recognized the beauty of this art form,<sup>9</sup> wrote about it in *Brihat*

*Banga* (1935), and had drawings of two kanthas made for the book.<sup>10</sup> Jasimuddin not only preceded the others in writing about the kantha, he was also the first to recognize the beauty and symbolic significance of this woman's art and give it the name by which it has become popular today.<sup>11</sup>

However, once independence was achieved in 1947, which also entailed the partition of united India into the two separate nations of India and Pakistan, the latter being divided into two wings, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh), this interest in folk art seemed to have died out. There were so many other problems attending the new nations—one of the foremost being the displacement of millions of people both east and west—that a woman's art paled in significance. It is perhaps no coincidence that interest in folk art revived in Bangladesh during the mid-1950s, when the Language Movement for the recognition of Bangla started gathering force. The killing of protesters on February 21, 1952, outside Dhaka Medical College, gave an impetus to a Bengali nationalism that would culminate in the war for independence in 1971. The artists Zainul Abedin, who set up the Art College that later became the Institute of Fine Arts, and Quamrul Hassan, who called himself a *patua* (folk artist) to suggest his kinship with folk artists and helped found the Design Centre for East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (now Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation), recognized the importance of the folk art heritage of Bengal. In the mid-1950s Abedin collected folk artifacts for an exhibition, which he hoped would be housed later in a folk art museum. He was assisted in this work by Mohammad Sayeedur, who became a collector for the Bangla Academy<sup>12</sup> and later started his own folk art collection, housed in his private museum at Kishorganj.<sup>13</sup> Another person who recognized the importance of folk artifacts was Tofail Ahmed, an educator who collected folk artifacts and set up a private museum in his own house.<sup>14</sup> Despite these efforts, by the mid-1960s it seemed that the kantha was a lost art form. Writing about the ancient crafts of Bengal in *Amader Prachin Shilpa* (Our Ancient Crafts), Ahmed bemoaned this loss: "This Pakistani people's craft is dying. Just the memory of this lost craft will remain in *Nakshi Kanthar Math* by Jasimuddin, the poet of rural Bengal."<sup>15</sup>



Apart from the kanthas in private collections, locked up in trunks in people's homes or in boxes in the Dacca Museum,<sup>16</sup> there were no embroidered kanthas on display or for sale, except for the cross-stitch kanthas made in the Chapainawabganj center of the East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation. It was only in 1972 that interest in indigenous and women's art forms—*alpana* (ritual painting),<sup>17</sup> *shika* (a pot hanger made of jute string), and *kantha*—was revived in what was now the independent country of Bangladesh. This revival, especially of the *kantha*, was in part to help provide a means of livelihood for women abandoned or left destitute because of the war.<sup>18</sup> The revival was also, and perhaps to a greater extent, inspired by pride in the culture of the nation. In 1974, for example, a National Crafts Exhibition was held in Dhaka to display indigenous crafts and to encourage their preservation. The success of this exhibition led to the establishment of a permanent crafts center. Thus Karika was born, followed by the similar centers Aarong in Dhaka (and now with branches in Khulna, Sylhet, Chittagong, and London) and Kumudini in Narayanganj,<sup>19</sup> both of which encouraged the development and marketing of designed kanthas, among other crafts, often by examining old pieces in museums such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The *kantha*, however, really took off during the refurbishing of Dhaka's Hotel Sonargaon, the name of which means "golden village" and harkens back to a glorious past.<sup>20</sup> Although in the mid-1990s it appeared that the market was saturated by kanthas made to meet new tastes and needs, the successful *kantha* exhibition *The Story of Stitches*, with new designs and replicas of old kanthas,<sup>21</sup> organized by Aarong in celebration of its thirtieth anniversary in July 2008, suggests that the *kantha* is very much a living craft—and I would emphasize craft rather than art.

The kanthas of today, designed by professionals (often men) and sold at prices considered high by local standards, are very different from the early kanthas, made for love rather than money and "designed" by the women who were actually embroidering them. Even when a woman copied a design she had seen in another *kantha*, or a motif in another art form, she combined these borrowings in her own way. The

finest of these kanthas date from 1850 to 1950. In many ways, they depict a world that remains much the same today, but at the same time they incorporate the small as well as significant changes that were encroaching upon the world of Bengal. The kanthas juxtapose scenes from legends or contemporary life with motifs that are still part of the Bengal landscape and homestead. But there are also scenes of the British inroads into India, with depictions of English sahibs and soldiers, steamers and trains—and occasionally even the inclusion of a sentence that looks like one from an English primer. Most of these quilts are anonymous, but a few have signatures; others contain bits of writing that complement the embroidery and give us insights into the thoughts and feelings of these women from the past, as well as occasionally let us into the world of *kantha* making.

While much folk art in South Asia belongs to "unlettered people," the finest embroidered quilts or *nakshi* kanthas do not seem to have come from illiterate individuals. Some of the kanthas have inscriptions on them, occasionally in a very fine hand. The vast majority, of course, have no writing on them. Many of the most exquisitely embroidered kanthas suggest that the household was exposed to art and culture, perhaps just to temples with Hindu iconography or terra-cotta art. It is more probable that the finer the *kantha*, the more exposed the maker was to art and culture. In the eighteenth-century Kantaji Temple, in Dinajpur, for example, there are images of Radha and Krishna, Sita and Rama, as well as scenes from everyday life such as fighting, hunting, or smoking a hookah. One of the episodes from the Krishna legend is of the *vastraharana* (Bangla *bastraharan*), or theft of garments, referring to an episode in which the playful god steals the garments of the *gopis* (cowherd women). This scene, which is replicated in a number of kanthas, including some in the Kramrisch Collection (see, e.g., fig. 4.8), is also found in the terra-cotta decorations of this temple (fig. 5.1).<sup>22</sup>

Kanthas made of fine saris or dhotis also tend to have finer workmanship, in contrast to the coarser, thicker embroidery on kanthas made of coarser saris or *kapa*.<sup>23</sup> Fine saris were, of course, only affordable to the relatively more affluent.



Fig. 5.1. The *vastraharana* scene from the Kantaji Temple in Dinajpur, Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, with Krishna in the treetop playing the flute while the *gopis* below plead for their clothes. Photograph by Montasir Rahman Gora



The few kanthas that have inscriptions provide an interesting insight into the world of the women who embroidered them. Although the majority of kanthas are anonymous, the few that do have “signatures” on them usually identify the maker only by reference to her relationship to the person for whom the kantha was made. Sometimes the actual name of the maker is given. Similarly, the actual name of the owner is occasionally given, or, at other times, his or her relationship to the maker. A few kanthas note the date of completion, others both the dates of commencement and completion. Other inscriptions contain the address of the maker or the owner and the good wishes and blessings of the maker for the person for whom the kantha was being made. A few kanthas have captions similar to those in some of the early Indo-Portuguese quilts made at Satgaon, as well as common sayings and holy texts. Some inscriptions also incorporate the term for the specific type of kan-

tha being made and suggest its purpose. The placement of these writings differs. Sometimes they are written close to the border of the kantha, sometimes around the central mandala; sometimes they are scattered, seemingly written wherever space was available. In most the script is Bangla, in a few a Sanskritized Bangla, in others a Bangla that contains both “Hindu” and “Muslim” vocabulary, that is, words derived from Sanskrit with words from Arabic and Persian. In a few, both Bangla and English are used. Occasionally, as in a Khulna kantha in the Bangladesh National Museum Collection (67.428), writing even appears in three languages, in this case Bangla, English, and Arabic.

It is often difficult to read inscriptions on kanthas as sometimes the writing is frayed and undecipherable through overuse of the kantha. At other times the words are difficult to decipher because spellings are garbled. Many of these inscriptions suggest that the kantha maker was semiliterate or even, occasionally, illiterate and had someone write the words for her on a piece of paper that she then copied onto the cloth, without being able to understand what she had written. Sometimes words run on without spacing; at other times a word is misspelled or is broken up between lines.

One of the most remarkable of kanthas—the centerpiece of the kantha, one might say—is the one by Manadasundari in the Gurusaday Museum<sup>24</sup> near Kolkata (see fig. 3.5). Exceptional for the motifs and scenes embroidered on it as well as for its exquisite workmanship, this kantha has an inscription in neat, legible Bangla calligraphy around the mandala, the central lotus motif. The inscription is a detailed one, providing the name of the maker, the name of the person for whom it was made, as well as the name of the village where they dwelt. Situated as the inscription is in the center of the kantha, almost part of the central motif, it draws attention to itself—as it was undoubtedly meant to. The inscription is in cursive Bangla script, with the *matra* (overhead line) joining the letters of each word. In fact, many of the words that should be separate are fused together. Moreover, there is no *dari* (period or stop) between the separate sentences. As the inscription stands, it therefore reads as follows: *eisajnijangalbadhal nibasibaradakanta*



*basurkanyaamishrimatimanadasundari dasya mama hasteprastut purbak sriyutpita thakur mahashayekeisajni pranam purbak dilam shabhyagan mahashayera yetriti haymap kariben.* However, when the words are separated as they should be, the lines read: *ei sajni [sujni] jangalbadhal nibasi barada kanta basur kanya ami shrimati manadasundari dasya mama haste prastut purbak sriyut pita thakur mahashayeke ei sajni [sujni] pranam purbak dilam shabhyagan mahashayera ye triti [truti] hay map kariben* (This *sujni* was made by the own hands of the humble Shrimati Manadasundari in honor of her venerated father Barada Kanta Basu of Jangalbadhal. Gentlemen may kindly forgive any mistakes that have been committed). This *kantha* therefore not only gives the name of the maker and the name of her village, it also tells us for whom she made the *kantha* (fig. 5.2).

Perhaps even more important is what this inscription reveals about *kantha* making. We tend to think that all *kanthas* were made by the women of the family for its members, but this inscription reveals that not all *kanthas* were so made. The phrase “made by the own hands” suggests that this *kantha* was different from others because Manadasundari made it herself. In other words, not all *kanthas* were made by the hands of upper-class women.<sup>25</sup> This *kantha* was undoubtedly a labor of love by a woman for her father, whereas other *kanthas* were commissioned—a practice that continues today in Bangladesh, where many people still prefer to use a *kantha* as coverlet. What is also surprising about this *kantha* is that it was made for a father, not a husband or daughter about to be given in marriage.<sup>26</sup> Manadasundari refers to herself as *dasya*, “slave.” However, the term should not be taken literally; rather, she uses it to signify her humility before her honored father. Asking forgiveness for mistakes that might have been committed is still traditional in India and Bangladesh. The use of the word *map* for the Arabic/Urdu *maf* rather than the Bangla *kshama*<sup>27</sup> is interesting, suggesting that Urdu words had also become part of the Bangla vocabulary of a Hindu family.

The word *sujni* that Manadasundari uses is also interesting. In Bihar, as well as in some parts of West Bengal, this term, rather than “*kantha*,” is used for light quilts.<sup>28</sup> In other words, *sujni* and *kantha* refer to

the same article. However, the etymologies of the two words are significantly different. The word “*kantha*” comes from the Sanskrit word *kantha*, for rags. The *kantha*, also referred to as *kheta*, *khata*, and *kaentha*, is popularly associated with penury. Thus, both the Muslim fakir and Hindu ascetic are associated with the *kantha*, and, in a Bengali folktale, two old women—a variant has two brothers—are so poor that between them they have just one *kantha* to share.<sup>29</sup> The word *sujni*, unlike “*kantha*,” has associations with embroidery, being derived from the Persian term *suzan*, referring to needle. The term *suzani*, meaning “of needles” or “embroidered,” is still used for decorative tribal textiles made in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian countries. Manadasundari used *sujni*, however, simply as a

Fig 5.2. Detail of a *sujni* *kantha* from Khulna with an elaborate Bangla inscription noting that Shrimati Manadasundari made the piece with her own hands for her father. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata (GM 1481). Photograph by Danelle Mason





synonym for kantha. Gurusaday Dutt—and others following him—used the word, usually combined with kantha, thus “*sujni kantha*,” to describe an embroidered kantha that is smaller and thinner than the *lep* kantha, which is meant to be used as a winter quilt and is generally less intricately embroidered.

Unlike Kramrisch, who used the generic term “kantha” for all quilted articles, large and small and regardless of purpose, Dutt divided kanthas into seven categories, based on size and function. Ranging from the smallest to the largest, they are as follows: *rumal* (handkerchief); *arshilata* (wrap for comb and mirror); *wad* (pillow cover); *durjani* (wallet);<sup>30</sup> *bayton* (wrap for tying up books or other valuables);<sup>31</sup> *sujni kantha* (bedspread for seating honored guests on ceremonial occasions such as weddings); and *lep kantha* (winter quilt).<sup>32</sup> Dutt conflated the *sujni* and *ashan*, using the former for both a larger spread as well as a smaller one. In Bangladesh, *sujni* refers to a bed cover or spread while *ashan* refers to a smaller spread, meant specifically for seating guests. Mohamad Sayeedur, for example, used the term *ashan*, as did Perveen Ahmed in *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha: Bangladesh National Museum Collection*.<sup>33</sup> Sayeedur added other terms to Dutt’s list. Thus, in addition to *ashan*, he has *jainamaz*, *dastarkhan*, and *gilaf*—a larger version of the *durjani* or *batua*. Significantly, all three belong to the Muslim culture of Bengal, being, respectively, a prayer rug; a long, narrow spread to be laid on the floor for serving food; and a Quran cover. Dutt was obviously aware of the Muslim contribution to the kantha—a *lep* kantha in his collection (now in the Gurusaday Museum, GM 1482) being from a Muslim family.

Apart from Manadasundari, who uses the term *sujni* in her quilt, a few other kantha makers also incorporate the name of the article being made in the inscriptions on their kanthas. Thus a kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection gives us the term *ashan*. There are a number of inscriptions on this kantha, one of which reads *Badshah bashibar ashan*. Literally, these words mean “a seat for the king to sit.” The term *badshah* (king)—the Muslim equivalent of *raja*—is used here to refer to the bridegroom, who is often referred to in the Muslim community as *naushah*, new king. The maker therefore reveals her religion as

well as that of the person for whom the kantha was being made (fig. 5.3; see also fig. 3.11).

Other terms are also incorporated into kanthas. Gurusaday used the term *bayton* to refer to kanthas used as wraps for clothes and other articles; another common term is *gatri*. Thus, a square kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection has the text, *san 13 / 16 / ei gatrir malek / shrimati* (The year 1316 [1909/10]<sup>34</sup> the owner of this *gatri* is Shrimati; see fig. 3.12). Although Shrimati is an honorific, here it seems to have been used as a name. One does not know, however, whether Shrimati was both the maker of the kantha as well as the owner.

Some kanthas that provide the names of the embroiderers include a *jainamaz* kantha from Noapara, which has been simply inscribed: *mosa[mmat] mariyam bibi*, Miss Marium Bibi. The Gurusaday Museum has a number of kanthas with the names of the embroiderers. For example, two *lep* kanthas from Jessore have the following inscriptions, respectively: *shrimati nemmala bala datta* (Shrimati Nemmala Bala Dutta; GC 1573) and *chapala bala ray* (Chapala Bala Ray; GC 1475). A kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 75) notes that it was made by Shrimati Mohit Kumari Chanda. Another piece in the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 7) has the name Bernal Kamini.

Other kanthas provide the name of the maker as well as the name of her village. Thus, in a *bostani* kantha from Rajshahi District, also in the Gurusaday Collection, the maker has inscribed her name and that of her village: *shrimati sarala bala debi / sang harishchandra kata*—meaning Shrimati Sarala Bala Debi from Harishchandra. Other kanthas provide a date as well, possibly of completion of the kantha. For example, an early-twentieth-century kantha contains the maker’s name, the name of her village, and the date of completion. The maker’s name is written in both Bangla and English, which was at that time the official language as well as the medium of higher education, as well as in two styles, one common in Bangla, the other believed more appropriate in English. In this neatly stitched kantha, with its bare minimum of motifs, the name of the maker and her village become part of the central mandala design. The date is given in English only: *S. B. Debi Nohata 1919 shrimati saralabala debi nohata*.<sup>35</sup> A kantha in the



Bonovitz Collection (see plate 63) provides the maker's name, as well as the Bangla year and Bangla month: *shrimati labanya prabha / saha gram kalta / san 1335 sal / ashar mas* (Shrimati Labanya Prabha / Saha Village Kalta / Year 1335[1928] year / the month of Ashar [June 15–July 14]).<sup>36</sup> Most of these kantha makers are Hindu women, as their names and the use of the honorific "Shrimati" before their names suggest. However, there was occasionally a synthesis, a crossing of religious-linguistic boundaries. For example, in an *ashan* kantha from Gopalganj in Mohammad Sayeedur's collection, the kantha maker uses the Hindu honorific before a Muslim name: *shrimati hajera khatun / sang talukpara*, that is, "Shrimati Hajera Khatun from Talukpara" (fig. 5.4). A kantha from the Kramrisch Collection (see plate 1) depicts several scenes from the Radha-Krishna legend and suggests the link between writing, the cloth on which the scenes are embroidered, and the meritorious act performed by the woman embroidering the kantha:

*Angme ei bastre / likhilam iti / haricharane ashi / kamala basini / dasi* (On this cloth / I write the end / coming to the feet of the Lord / Kamala Basini / Dasi).<sup>37</sup>

The majority of kanthas are, however, anonymous, and even those that have inscriptions on them do not name the woman who made the kantha except by providing her relationship to the person for whom she was making the kantha. For example, the *ashan* in the Zainul Abedin Collection made for a bridegroom (see fig. 5.3) notes that it was made by the mother of the bride: *Majaner matar toiri*. Literally, the words *majaner mata* mean the mother of the mother, but in Bengal a daughter is also lovingly referred to as *ma* (mother).<sup>38</sup> We can therefore assume that this *ashan* was made by the bride's mother rather than grandmother. Similarly, in another kantha, also in the Zainul Abedin Collection, the kantha maker writes that the piece was made by the gentleman's mother: *Shrimaner matar toiyari*.<sup>39</sup> The use of what the maker might have thought of as a more formal participle form—*toiyari* rather than *toiri*—suggests a household that thought of itself as educated, which it must have been compared to other households in the area. Someone in the house was familiar with English, as borne out by the use of some English words in the inscription. Never mind some of the errors that crept in.



Fig. 5.3. Detail of an *ashan* kantha for a bridegroom, with the inscription *Badshah bashbar ashan* and a blessing, *Sukhi thako*. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Darielle Mason



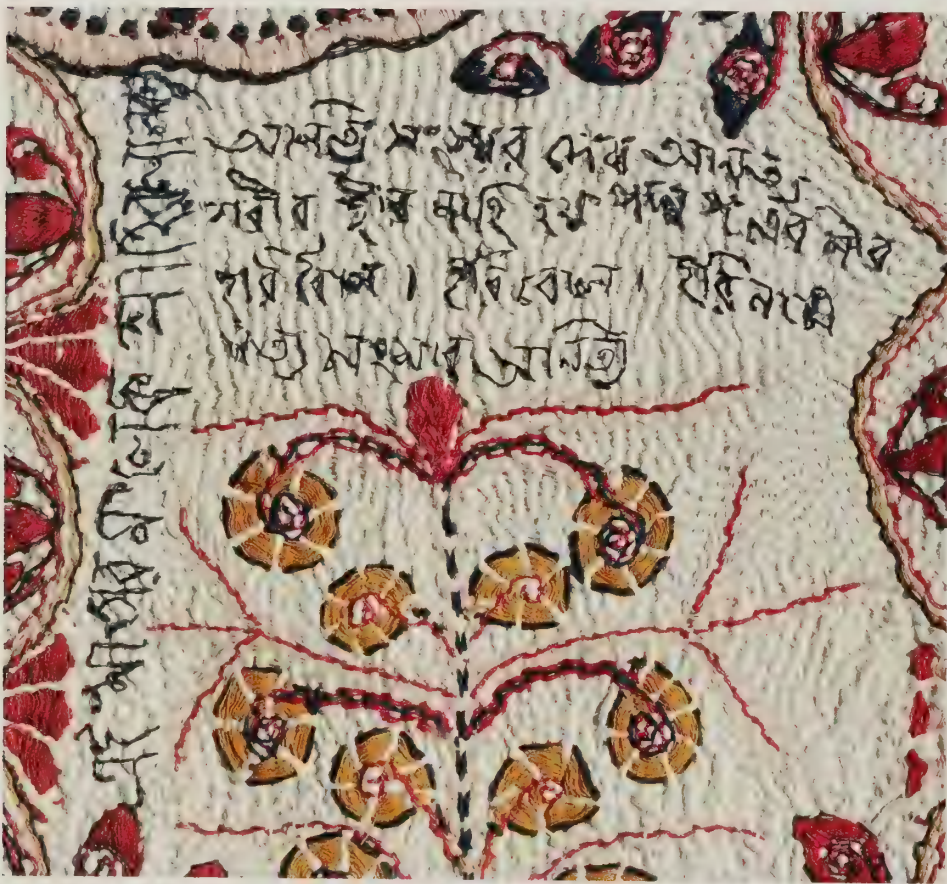
Fig. 5.4. *Ashan* kantha inscribed *shrimati hajera khatun sang talukpara*. Mohammad Sayeedur Collection, courtesy Muktijuddha Jadughar



Fig. 5.5. Detail of a kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 56) inscribed with the name of the owner, Shri Samandari Das

Fig. 5.6. Detail of plate 9 with an inscription noting that the owner of the kantha is Shri Hiralal Bandyapadhyay, as well as one stating that "the world is ephemeral"

More often than the name of the maker, it is the name of the owner that appears in kantha inscriptions. Thus a kantha from the Bonovitz Collection has the name Shri Samandari Das inscribed on it (fig. 5.5). A kantha in the collection of the National Museum of India in New Delhi has a man's name in English, Gopal Chandra Girish, and a kantha given to Stella Kramrisch has her name similarly inscribed (see plate 16). Another kantha from the Kramrisch Collection not only has the name of the owner inscribed clearly, it also notes that he is the owner of the kantha: *ei khatar malek shrihiralal bandya[padhyay]*<sup>40</sup> (the owner of this kantha is Shri Hiralal Bandyopadhyay) (fig. 5.6).



While many of the inscriptions on kanthas are of a personal nature, others are more in the nature of captions. Thus some kanthas depicting mythological scenes from Hindu legends, often juxtaposing religious and secular themes, are captioned—as in some Indo-Portuguese quilts. This juxtaposition of religious and secular themes is also a feature of Hindu temple art. The scene, for example, of a pleasure boat ride or of a row of soldiers found in some kanthas may also be seen in the terra-cotta friezes of the Kantaji Temple in Dinajpur.<sup>41</sup> The manner in which some kanthas are divided into panels is also reminiscent of Indo-Portuguese quilts. This is particularly true of a marriage kantha from Faridpur, which depicts the wedding of Rama and Sita as well as several episodes from the Radha-Krishna legend.<sup>42</sup> In one corner of the kantha is the *vastraharana*, in which naked *gopis* stand below a *kadamba* tree pleading with Krishna, who is sitting on the branches of the tree, to return their clothes. In the style of the Indo-Portuguese quilts, this scene is labeled in Bangla script: *gopir bastraharan* (the theft of the cowherd women's garments).

Another panel in the same kantha depicts a dark, dhoti-clad man on his knees before a seated woman who has covered her head and turned her face away from him. The dark complexion of the kneeling man reveals that it is Krishna. The seated woman is Radha. The scene is captioned *shrimatir manbhanjan*, that is, an attempt to diffuse the lady's anger. The word *man* has a number of connotations, depending on the context. It may mean "worth" or "honor." When it is used in the context of a love relationship, it refers to the anger of one of the pair as a result of some lapse on the other's part. The word has no English equivalent and means a lover's anger, but an anger that can be diffused after a lot of pleading on the lover's part. The relationship between Radha and Krishna has been explained in spiritual terms, as the love of the divine lover for the human soul. However, Radha and Krishna are also symbolic of secular love and therefore have become a favorite pair in kanthas, which are also offerings of love on the part of the woman who embroiders the kantha. Thus the *vastraharana* scene is depicted in two kanthas from the Kramrisch Collection (see plates 3, 37). Also popular is the scene of Krishna playing the flute, his legs crossed, standing



next to Radha. A number of kanthas in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections replicate this scene (fig. 5.7). This pose of Krishna's is also depicted on the Kantaji Temple.<sup>43</sup> The *naukavilas*, a pleasure boat ride with Krishna, Radha, and the *gopis*, is also popular and is depicted in a number of kanthas. (See, for example, plate 1, which depicts other scenes from the Radha-Krishna legend, including Krishna's childhood. The *naukavilas* scene is miscaptioned *Danakhandan*, referring to another episode in the story.)

Despite the romantic scenes in many kanthas, early kanthas also reveal a world where women led private lives in homes where men were accepted as lord and master. Even today, a woman referring to her husband might use the Bangla term *karta*, meaning "lord" and "master." A cross-stitch kantha by Parul in the Bangladesh National Museum collection depicts a four-armed Saraswati, goddess of learning. The inscription on this kantha reflects a woman's status vis-à-vis her husband's: *gayakashibrindaban / sakaliashar / ramanijibane / shudhuswami / padasar / 1359 / parul* (Gaya, Kashi, Vrindavan [Hindu holy places] are nothing to me. A woman's existence is at her husband's feet. 1952/53.<sup>44</sup> Parul). There are no spaces between the words, so that Gaya, Kashi, Vrindavan read *gayakashibrindaban*. Parul obviously came from an educated family, as the portrayal of the goddess of learning suggests. However, the family was conservative, believing that a woman's position is at her husband's feet. Although Parul is a name that is also used by Muslims, they use it as a nickname or pet name—the *aqiqa*<sup>45</sup> (ritually given) name always being a Muslim one. The depiction of Saraswati and the references to Hindu holy places make it clear that this kantha is the work of a Hindu woman. However, the sentiment expressed here has become accepted by Muslim women as well, who believe that the status of a woman is at her husband's feet.<sup>46</sup> They have heard this saying so often that they believe that it is a *hadith*, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>47</sup> Most large kanthas were meant to be spread on the floor or over furniture, but Parul's kantha appears to have been made to be framed on the wall.<sup>48</sup>

Like Parul's kantha, some other kanthas also contain familiar proverbs. Thus Shri Hiralal Bandyopadhyay's kantha in the Kramrisch Collection has a



proverb about the brevity and unsubstantiality of life: *anitya sangsar dekha anitya [anitya] / sarir, sthir nahi hay padma patrer nir / hari bol hari bol hari name / satya sangsar anitya* (This world is ephemeral, look the body is ephemeral, water does not stay on a lotus leaf. Take the name of God, take the name of God, in God's name. The truth is the world is ephemeral) (see fig. 5.6). Bangla used to have a formal, heavily Sanskritized form and a colloquial form in addition to several local dialects. The language of this kantha—like that of Manadasundari's—is a Sanskritized one. This form of the language was associated with the upper class, to which Shri Hiralal Bandyopadhyay belonged. His surname reveals that he was a Brahmin.

Many kanthas embroidered by Hindu women portray deities, religious symbols, and icons. Shri Hiralal Bandyopadhyay's kantha, for example, depicts the goddess Durga overcoming the evil demon Mahishasura (the buffalo demon). Durga is a more kindly form of the goddess Kali. Even as she stops the demon, she is shown flanked by her four children, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Karttikeya, and Saraswati, with the figure of her husband, Shiva, overhead (see fig. 4.31).

Fig. 5.7. Detail of plate 80 depicting Krishna, his legs crossed, playing the flute. The inscription reads *Shrimati Nipumuyi Dasya*.





Fig. 5.8. A *bostani* or *gatri* kantha juxtaposing motifs of a *ratha* and a mosque. Moham-mad Sayeedur Collection, courtesy of Muktijuddha Jadughar

Durga Puja is based on the yearly visit of the Bengali wife to her parental home, the end of the *puja* symbolizing the return of the goddess to her heavenly abode just as the Bengali woman returns to her husband's home after her visit to her natal home.<sup>49</sup> Durga is thus both daughter and wife. However, in her embodiment as the destroyer of the evil demon, she is no less than the goddess Kali a depiction of female power. Hindu women of the nineteenth century lived in a patriarchal world that was heavily discriminatory against women. The voicing of a woman's feelings was often only possible through the "wordless" medium of embroidery.

At the same time, many kanthas embroidered by Hindu women do not depict gods and goddesses, but

only religious symbols. One of the most common of these is the image of the *ratha*, the chariot of the god. Many kanthas have a stylized *ratha*, occasionally juxtaposing a stylized mosque, as in a *gatri* or *bostani* (wrapper for clothes or other articles) from Mohammad Sayeedur's collection (fig. 5.8). Others, as in a kantha from the Bonovitz Collection, depict the deities Jagannatha, an avatar of Vishnu, his brother Balarama, and their sister Subhadra (fig. 5.9; see also plate 62). While the *ratha* by itself was an auspicious symbol invoking the presence of the deity, a few kanthas have religious texts inscribed on them as well. On this same Bonovitz piece, across from the depiction of the *ratha* are the words *hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare / hare rama / hare rama / rama / rama / hare hare* (fig. 5.10). In yet another Bonovitz piece, these words are embroidered throughout the kantha, between the borders, almost becoming part of the texture of the quilt (fig. 5.11; see also plate 74).

Most inscriptions in the kanthas are in Bangla. In a few kanthas, however, there are some English inscriptions. Apart from the pieces made for Gopal Chandra Girish, in the National Museum of India in New Delhi, and Stella Kramrisch (see plate 16), with their names written in English in neat script, a number of other kanthas also reveal some familiarity with English. It is possible that the embroiderer was familiar with English, but in most cases it appears that the kantha maker did not know the language. In one famous example, the embroiderer stitched the seal of the factory that was on the cloth from which the kantha was made—revealing also that kanthas were not always made of old cloth, but could be created from new, factory-made cloth. In another case it appears that someone in the household was just learning English, perhaps attending primary school, as the words and phrases seem to be from an English primer. Thus in a kantha from Jessore District in the Zainul Abedin Collection—notable for its use of bright pink wool—the word "house" is spelled "HauSE" (see fig. 5.12). In a kantha from Khulna in the Bangladesh National Museum collection (67.428) the following phrases appear: *THE COW GOOD* and *All-boys LIKETORAILWAY*.<sup>50</sup> There are no spaces between the words in the second sentence. The first sentence uses all capital letters; the second uses both capital





Fig. 5.9. Detail of plate 62 depicting the deities Jagan-natha, Balarama, and Subhadra

Fig. 5.10. Detail of plate 62 showing the inscription across the ratha

Fig. 5.11. Detail of plate 74. In this kantha, the religious naming of god (Krishna, Hare, Rama) becomes the pattern of the entire quilt

and small letters but does not distinguish between their use.<sup>51</sup> In addition to these phrases, the date—most likely of completion of the kantha—is noted: 13 JULY24 [1].<sup>52</sup> However, there is also an attempt to write in cursive script. The attempt fails and the word ends with the capital letters CABRAD. On the left of the kantha is a Bangla inscription: *chesta karilehay* (you will succeed if you try). Next to this is a garbled

Arabic text: *raham la illaha* (mercy there is no God). Below this is a Bangla inscription, *Ilahi bharasa* (Depend upon God / God willing). The kantha maker's religion is revealed in her use of Muslim terms and Arabic text.

While most kanthas tend to have a central lotus, the Jessore District kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection referred to earlier has a central square set off





Fig. 5.12. Detail of a kantha from Jessore with inscriptions in Bangla and English, including the word *HauSE* (upper right). Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka

from the rest of the kantha, with a small lotus motif alongside a number of other motifs, which are captioned (fig. 5.12). On the upper left-hand corner of the square is a small rectangle with the following text: *shrishajalmeyar aloy / sang kumar kanda / post lohogada / yela yashohar eta boi / thanalaksipasa / shrimaner matar touyari [toiyari]* (Residence of Shri Shajal<sup>53</sup> Meya / of Kumar Kanda / Post Office Lohogada / Zilla Jessore This is a book / Thana [Police Station] Laksipasa / Made by the gentleman's mother). The resemblance of this inscription to an address on an envelope is remarkable. In Bangladesh, letters to villages were often addressed in this format: The name of the person, the name of the village, the name of the post office, the name of the *thana* (police station) and the name of the district. "Shri" is a Hindu honorific. However, as in the case of Shrimati Hajera Khatun, where the female Hindu honorific is used, here a male Hindu honorific is used.

The motifs within the square are a house, earrings, a pocket watch, a football, the moon, a bicycle, a hurricane lantern, an inkpot with a pen, a steamer, an umbrella, and a small lotus motif. With the exception of the lotus motif, all the motifs are captioned—all in Bangla with the exception of the house, which

is captioned in English: *HauSE*. The earrings are captioned *marki*, a misspelling for *makri*. The Urdu/Muslim word *dawat* is used for ink—the ordinary Bangla word would be *kali*. The formal word *chandra* is used for the moon rather than the more common *chand*. Despite the seeming familiarity of the kantha maker with both Bangla and English, there are a number of misspellings in Bangla. For example, the word football is spelled *fudbal* (as it would be pronounced), and the Bangla letter for "s" in *saike* (cycle) resembles the Bangla "m."

The objects of desire in this kantha are indicative of a woman who had been exposed to the world of education, as reflected in the pen and the inkpot; who had seen a pocket watch, perhaps in the possession of her husband; who knew about the world of sports, as suggested by the football; who had a smattering of exposure to English—she knew the English word "house"; and who had seen different forms of modern transport, both small and large, as in the bicycle and the steamer. She also obviously lived in a world where there was no electricity and where after dark it was the hurricane lantern that provided light.<sup>54</sup> Thus this household did not go to sleep as soon as night fell. Women did not sew or cook after dark,<sup>55</sup> but men would read and study by the light of the hurricane lantern. If these images are not enough to reveal the background of the woman, the use of pink wool also suggests a woman of some affluence, one whose household was exposed to the West; wool was, after all, a luxury import. The use of the same wool in a *bostani* kantha also in the Zainul Abedin Collection (see fig. 3.12) suggests that both of these might have come from the same household.<sup>56</sup>

While a number of kanthas have one date—the date of completion—some also note the date of commencement. Thus the *bostani* (wrap for clothes and other valuables) kantha belonging to Shrimati in the Zainul Abedin Collection notes that the work was begun on the first of Bhadra, approximately August 15 (unfortunately, the year is unreadable), and ended on the thirteenth of Magh, 1316, approximately January 26, 1910. The month of Bhadra comes after the monsoon season is over. It is characterized by days when the sun is bright and hot, but then sudden clouds come and overcast the sky. Good housewives,



who try to take advantage of the periods of bright sunshine to put out their clothes and quilts in the sun, have to run out to bring them in from the sudden rain showers. In the process of putting out their clothes, they also pick out relatively worn-out pieces of saris, *lungis* (saronglike wrappers knotted at the waist), and dhotis and put them aside to make into kanthas. We cannot decipher the year this kantha began, but it is easy to picture Shrimati—if she was the maker as well as the owner of the kantha—taking advantage of the yearly ritual of putting out clothes during Bhadra, selecting cloth for her *bostani*, laying out the kantha and then stitching it throughout winter when it is very pleasant to sit in the sun. Kantha work was always spare-time work, done after the daily cleaning, cooking, washing, feeding, tending to household cattle and chickens, as well as the seasonal farm work—boiling the paddy, drying it, husking it, and so on—were done. Although winter entailed additional work, the dry, sunny days meant that one could take advantage of the season to work on kanthas.

Even today, in kantha-making areas of Bangladesh such as Chapainawabaganj, kantha *ashans* are made for seating the bridegroom, or honored guests, often relations by marriage. Like the larger *sujni*, the *ashan* and *gatri* or *bostani* were generally made for others, and either implicitly or explicitly express the maker's love and care. One of the most significant associations of the kantha, that of being made of rags, was connected to the magical property of warding off the evil eye. In a number of kanthas this wish has been expressly stated in motif or writing. Thus an *ashan* kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection made by a woman for her son-in-law explicitly contains the blessing *Sukhi thako*, be happy (see fig. 5.3). The motifs embroidered into this *ashan* complement this wish in images and symbols. These were not just pictures of everyday objects that the kantha maker saw around her, but symbols of happiness, fertility, and prosperity. In the four corners of the *ashan* are stylized leaves, shorthand for trees of life. The other everyday objects—a kantha, a pair of spectacles, and a comb—are all objects she saw around her as well as symbols of happiness in the marriage bed, wisdom, and beauty. One object, left as a signature per-

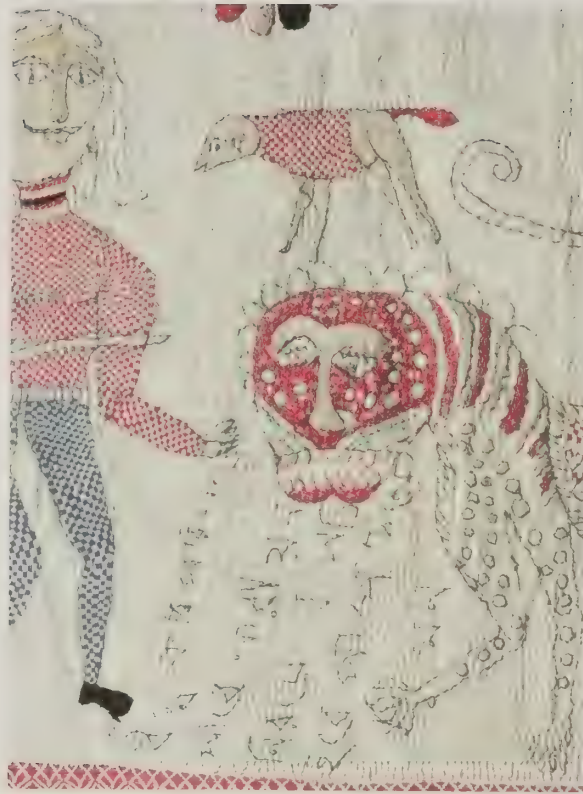
haps of the kantha maker, is the pair of scissors, a precious object for kantha makers, most of whom would have had to make do with their teeth and a strong pair of hands to tear the cloth. While the motifs by themselves would have suggested the hope expressed in words, the words confirm, echo, and stress the message contained in the objects, even as they dispel the notion that all kanthas were made by illiterate women.

Most kanthas share a certain structure: a central mandala consisting of a lotus, four trees of life or four *kalkas* (paisleys) in the corners; concentric borders and motifs; or just border designs around a central mandala, sometimes interspersed with motifs. However, the early kanthas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also reflect the world around the kantha maker, the actual world of home, family, and village that she saw and lived in as well as the outer world that she saw or heard about occasionally. To these worlds she brought her imagination and her skill with the needle. In her world, in addition to the domestic familiarities of betel cutters, cows, flowers, and leaves, there was also the dread of tigers. The transformation of the tiger motif in kanthas is often a playful depiction of these dreaded animals. Thus, Shrimati Mohit Kumar Chanda's kantha in the Bonovitz Collection (fig. 5.13; see also plate 75) depicts a tiger with a red face, red-and-yellow striped neck, and round spots running down his limbs plus heart-shaped spots on his trunk. He stands humbly in front of what appears to be a long-haired, blond Englishman in a long-sleeved shirt and tights with a stick in his hand.<sup>57</sup> The lion, the mount of the goddess Durga, is not indigenous to Bengal but makes his appearance in several kanthas. In Parul's kantha, for example, there is a maned lion. A lion is also depicted in a kantha from Barisal in the Bangladesh National Museum.<sup>58</sup> In addition to horses with riders, elephants, birds, cows, and two boars, a kantha in the Bonovitz Collection also depicts two lions (see plate 62). Camels, like lions, are not indigenous to Bengal but they also make their appearance occasionally. Two appear in the Bonovitz piece, while the Barisal kantha in the Bangladesh National Museum, for example, has a row of camels. Most kanthas from Barisal tend to be simpler in motifs and needlecraft; this kantha is an exception.



Fig. 5.13. Detail of plate 75 showing a multicolored tiger and a man in European dress

Fig. 5.14. A nineteenth-century kantha from Faridpur depicting well-dressed gentlemen and women hugging peacocks. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka (69.145) Photograph by M. Sadek



Birds, ducks, and peacocks are common in kanthas. The peacock is not an indigenous bird and its depiction has been variously explained. As rich *zamindars* (landlords)<sup>59</sup> were fond of keeping peacocks, the peacock became a symbol of wealth. In addition, however, in Indian art the peacock is associated with love. The representation of peacocks in kanthas perhaps combines both these meanings. In a nineteenth-century kantha from Faridpur in the Bangladesh National Museum, for example, there are two female figures hugging peacocks. In addition to the depiction of Radha and Krishna, who were associated with romantic love, the peacock may also be considered a symbol of erotic love (fig. 5.14).

Some kantha makers of the nineteenth century were less inhibited than other women of their class. Although many of the female figures in kanthas are respectably dressed, some women did not hesitate to depict nudity or breasts. In Manadasundari's kantha, for example, there are both "respectable" and "disreputable" women (see fig. 3.5). The respectable women are ranged on one side, their heads covered, and on

the other side are dancing girls and entertainers, their heads uncovered, their limbs revealed through their diaphanous garments. In the Radha-Krishna kantha from Faridpur (see plate 37), in addition to the "properly" dressed Radha and Krishna, there is a naked *gopi* standing below a *kadamba* tree pleading with Krishna for her clothes. A kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection has as its central point a picture of Gajalakshmi, the goddess Lakshmi with elephants, surrounded by a circle of dancing women (fig. 5.15).

In a kantha in the Gurusaday Museum, there is a picture of a nude woman, with both her breasts and her vulva defined.<sup>60</sup> Although the goddess and the dancing girls are fully clothed, the kantha maker has used her stitch craft to depict the rounded contours of the breasts of the goddess as well as of the dancing women. Hindu women would be exposed to Hindu art and iconography through their visits to various temples. They would be familiar with the depictions of human figures, often with considerable nudity.







Fig 5.15. A *sujni* kantha from Jessore showing Gajalakshmi, the goddess Lakshmi with elephants, surrounded by a circle of dancing girls. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Anisur Rahman

Muslim woman would not be similarly exposed. Moreover, they would observe the stricture against reproducing human bodies in art—let alone expose what a modest woman would keep covered.

The kantha maker of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even while working within the tradition, was not aware of preserving a traditional art, of what was folk and therefore alright (by the standards of early-twentieth-century scholarship) to depict and what was modern and therefore was not. If she drew a palanquin it was because she herself might have had occasion to travel in one. It was often the only means of transport for a woman from her father's home to her husband's. But she also drew the modern forms of transport that were encroaching upon her sheltered world. Thus she drew horses and elephants but also the train and the steamer. Both the steamer and the train became part of life in Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century, the train often transporting people to and

from stations that today are no longer fed by trains. The trains also meant a greater exposure to the outside world. Khulna, for example, was more closely tied to Calcutta in the nineteenth century, thanks to the trains, than it is today. The station at Mulghar was important in the nineteenth century, but today the station and the railway lines leading to and from it have fallen into decay. These modern forms of transportation were not, therefore, misfits in the "rural" world of the kantha maker, but very much part of it, even as they suggested the larger outside world of which the humble housewife could, perhaps, never be part, except in her imagination and through the skill of her nimble fingers.

The world of Bengal was going through many upheavals but, for the common man or woman, life seemed to be proceeding at an even pace. Despite resistance and protests, English education and British technological advancements seemed to have



entrenched themselves.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the old traditions formed an intrinsic part of the ethos of the women who made kanthas. It was a world close to nature, one that believed in the importance of natural fertility and the fertility of human beings. It was also a world that absorbed and assimilated diverse impressions. It is perhaps this that gives a sense of peace and harmony to the kanthas. Even when her world was threatened by tigers or by uniformed soldiers, the needlewoman could “overpower” all perils via her needlework. One is reminded here of the American poet Adrienne Rich’s “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Aunt Jennifer’s hands, circumscribed by the wedding band, are still able to draw the tigers prancing and unafraid. The kantha maker of Bengal, doubly circumscribed by patriarchal mores and colonial laws, could, in her needlework, embroider prancing horses or tigers, and also could “domesticate” the giant steamer and train<sup>62</sup> and place them next to an earring or a peacock.

The rural housewife embroidering her kantha was both witness to and preserver of this moment of impact of East and West. The advent of the British is recorded in several of the scenic depictions found in kanthas, as that of the Portuguese is documented in the terra-cotta plaques in the Kantaji Temple in Dinajpur.<sup>63</sup> As the nineteenth-century needlewoman saw the soldiers, hunters, or administrators, she embroidered them into her kantha. Some of these scenes she had seen at first hand. Generally, however, it was an imaginative depiction of what she had heard. It would have been highly unlikely, for example, for a village woman to have seen the *nautch* (elite dance performance) scene that she embroidered onto her kantha. It is also relevant that pictures and scenes painted and drawn by Europeans and those embroidered by kantha makers working at the same time are very different. Whereas European painters show Indians as servants or laborers, the kantha maker shows rich native gentry in beautifully worked garments as well as common folk. The Indian and the European thus exist in peaceful harmony on many nineteenth-century quilts, as indigenous motifs rub shoulders with European ones. Thus, the kantha maker embroidered the *ratha* and the palanquin that would carry her daughter or granddaughter to her

new home, but she also portrayed bicycles and trains. In kanthas holy men clad in the barest of garments may be juxtaposed with dapper gentlemen clad in pin-striped suits, as in Manadasundari’s kantha.

It is interesting that the women in these kanthas are depicted in various forms of indigenous dress—saris and *ghagras* (long, drawstring-waisted skirts). The men, likewise, are often in dhotis—*kaccha* or *vika-ccha* fashion, with one end drawn up between the legs, falling in graceful folds to the ankle—or even in *langoti* (loincloth), as the two watchmen are depicted in Manadasundari’s kantha (see fig. 3.5). In the nineteenth-century Faridpur kantha in the Bangladesh National Museum (see fig. 5.14), the gentlemen portrayed are sporting what appear to be modified European jackets and boots. In the Gurusaday Museum piece, Manadasundari has embroidered two rows of Europeans in her kantha. One row shows English soldiers on a march, their military costumes depicting designs never thought of by the British army. The other row shows top-hatted, dapper Englishmen clad in coats and trousers in different colorful patterns and textures. In addition, there are several men and women in native costumes. Most of the men are working men clad in different length dhotis, but in a framed picture a well-to-do couple appears. The woman wears an embroidered sari and blouse, but the man wears a pin-striped suit. This portrait resembles the formal photographs from the early years of the twentieth century when the women were clad in blouses and saris<sup>64</sup> but the men in European suits or uniforms.<sup>65</sup>

If one looks for a depiction of the anti-British movements that engaged the thinking man or woman of the early 1920s or of the upheaval that racked Bengal in 1947, one does not find it in the kanthas. Even Parul’s kantha, made in 1952/53, shows no signs of what had happened to make many Hindus flee East Bengal.<sup>66</sup> Nor does she seem at all aware of the earlier anti-British movement which had helped, though in a small way, to bring women, both Hindu and Muslim, out of their homes to rebel against the British.<sup>67</sup> Her world is still a world circumscribed by male superiority. Even kanthas that do not “speak” as Parul’s kantha does suggest male superiority. However, one wonders if the ubiquitous lotus was not a symbol of the woman who made the kantha. Most



writers on the kantha have noted the centrality of the lotus. The lotus has many meanings. It is the seat of the gods. It is a manifestation of cosmic harmony. Even the Muslim Wajeda Begum whom I met in Magura spoke of this symbolism, noting that the lotus has its roots in the earth, its leaves and flowers on the water, and looks up at the sky and sun, air, and fire. At the same time, to the women of Bengal, the lotus, following the sun as it traveled across the sky, opening and closing with the presence or absence of the sun, was a reminder that just as the life of the lotus depended on the sun so did a woman's on her husband. But the lotus is also a female symbol and ideograph. As Curt Maury notes, "The lotus has come to present the absolute equation of female being and female magic."<sup>68</sup>

Many writers, among them Kramrisch and Dutt, have remarked on the connections between the kantha and the *alpana* in design, motifs, and purpose.<sup>69</sup> Dutt categorizes *alpanas* into *ashan* and *brata* and notes how the *ashan alpana*, which is of a stereotyped pattern, consists of a central lotus, several concentric rings around the central lotus, and a *kalasa* (water pot) design around the circumference of all the concentric rings.<sup>70</sup> I was able to see a practical demonstration of this during a visit to Kishorganj with Mohammad Sayeedur in April 2006. The centrality of the lotus in the kantha as in the *alpana* became very clear then, as well as the realization of why the *ashta-dal* (eight-petaled lotus) is the most common form.

Sayeedur had promised us that Purnoshashi Saha was an expert in the art of the *alpana*. Although, according to her, she was eighty-three years old, her hands were steady and firm when she sat down to draw an *alpana* with a paste of rice powder and water. First, she drew a straight line in the center of what would be the *alpana*. Across this she drew another line to form a cross. Then she drew a third and a fourth line so that she had eight bisecting lines meeting at the center. This figure was both the center of the drawing and the guide to construct the rest of the design (fig. 5.16). She filled out the petals one by one (fig. 5.17), then she drew concentric circles followed by an outer *kalasa* design, and finally she proceeded to fill in the empty spaces with dots (fig. 5.18). Although the lotus does not form the center of all *alpanas*, it is common

enough in the *alpana* as in the kantha to suggest its primal significance and the presence of the woman who drew or embroidered it. The lotus is, however, a gentle reminder, never a loud assertion.

Occasionally, a kantha gives a glimpse into the psyche of a woman who refuses to keep her voice soft and low, who can protest, and who uses the field of the kantha as the forum in which to inscribe her protest. In a kantha from Pabna in the Bangladesh National Museum (73.2013), for example, a woman expresses her frustration.<sup>71</sup> There is some tension between husband and wife relating to her father-in-law. The woman inscribes the following line in the kantha: *ami tani amar dike o tane babar dike jabi [yabi]*<sup>72</sup> *shala ya*. (I pull him towards me, he pulls [me] towards his father. If you want to go, rascal,<sup>73</sup> go.) The script is in Bangla cursive, the letters of one word being attached to each other. However, the writing is cruder than that of Hiralal's or Manadasundari's kanthas. This suggests that the woman had a modicum of education, but enough to write in this fashion. The maker of the kantha appears to be Muslim as the focus of the kantha is on the borders and the simple floral motifs. Although it does have a central lotus motif, the motif is simply a depiction of square lines within a circle. In addition to trees, which spring from the inner borders, there are a few other motifs such as a palm leaf fan, a betel leaf, and a winnowing tray. There are four concentric borders: the outermost embroidered with black yarn in the *kaitya* (bent stitch), followed by a border in *anarasi* or *lik phor* (double-running or Holbein stitch) in red yarn, followed by a white border consisting of the kantha *phor* in white yarn. The innermost border is in *anarasi* or *lik* again, but in black yarn. The inscription is on one side of the kantha, between the black and red borders, worked in black *dal phor* (stem stitch). Not perhaps a work of fine art, the kantha is, nevertheless, because of the very personal emotions contained in it, priceless.

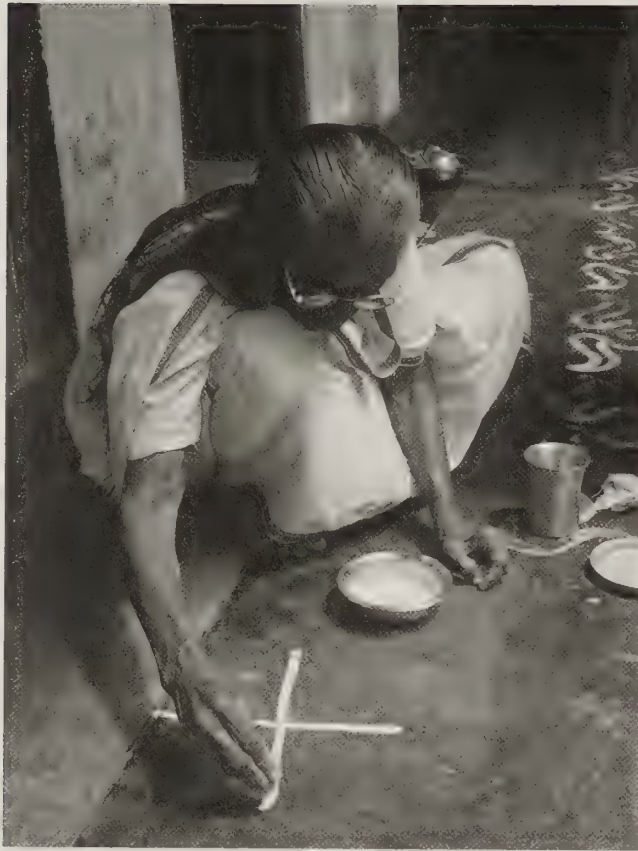
Generally, however, the women who embroidered kanthas in the past accepted their status in a world where a woman's place was known, as well as her roles as mother and child-bearer. This is why there are numerous fertility motifs in the kanthas. The tree of life, as much as the *kalka* with its bulbous



Fig. 5.16. Purnoshashi Saha drawing the center of a lotus in her *alpana*. Photograph by Zaki Omar

Fig. 5.17. Purnoshashi Saha filling out the lotus. Photograph by Zaki Omar

Fig. 5.18. Purnoshashi Saha's filled-out lotus, with dots and a *kalasa* (water pot). Photograph by Zaki Omar



shape, suggests the female presence. There were other fertility motifs in kanthas. In the Zainul Abedin Collection, for example, there is a kantha which replicates a fertility motif from *alpana* art (fig. 5.19). It is perhaps only today that NGOs working for women's empowerment are using the traditional form to express current concerns, such as the importance of birth control or to protest, for example, the unnecessary burdens that family and society place on women without acknowledging their unpaid contributions to the home and to the economy. Women are not lazy housewives. Apart from cooking, cleaning, and child-bearing and -rearing, in their "leisure" they stitch kanthas to ensure warmth and comfort. Perhaps the most famous example of this refusal to accept the image of woman as a nonworking member of society is a fairly recent kantha made by Banchte Shikha where a woman is shown with fourteen arms, each



arm performing a different job—one of which includes stitching a kantha—negating the statement made by many men: “My wife does not work.”<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, the kantha maker today working on a kantha with an explicit message is not revealing her own feelings. She is embroidering a kantha designed by someone else, a handicrafts outlet or an NGO working for women’s betterment and empowerment. With the heightened consciousness that craftswomen must be recognized, not remain anonymous, kantha wall-hangings provide the crafts-woman’s name inscribed in ink on a tag sewn to the cloth. But, despite the name, the woman is anonymous. She is not represented in the kantha as the women of the past often were, despite their anonymity. The maker today is not the creator as were the women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who designed and embroidered their own kanthas. It is rare today to find that the women who make the kanthas are also the ones who design them. Most embroidered kanthas today are made for handicraft houses and boutiques. They are designed by someone who has graduated from an art school or, as in the case of Surayia Rahman,<sup>75</sup> who had been designing kanthas since the early 1980s, is an artist. In both cases, the kantha is designed by someone else, and even the colored threads to be used are given to the craftswomen with precise instructions. The embroidery stitch to be used is also noted—the kantha *phor*, the *lik*, the *chatai*, the *kaitya*, the *bhorat* or Kashmiri stitch, a little stem stitch—no playful manipulations of the running stitch as in earlier kanthas. In order to ensure that faces of people in her pieces were done well, Surayia Rahman had “face-girls,” whose only work was to embroider faces. There are quality checks. Uneven stitches are taken out.<sup>76</sup> The name of the “maker” is written in ink on a piece of cloth tagged to the finished product. The purchaser of the kantha knows the name of the shop, which is on the label, and an interested purchaser can turn over the kantha to see the small tag with the name of the maker and the name of the organization to which she belongs. This naming of the maker is an attempt to remove the namelessness of kantha makers. Nevertheless, today’s kantha maker continues to be even more unknown than—if not quite as name-

less as—the kantha makers of the past because her work is not really hers, she is merely executing an order. There is none of the spontaneity of the earlier embroiderers who designed their own kanthas—even when they imitated other kanthas they had seen, they brought in some of their own perceptions of the world around them. Nor do these kanthas truly reflect what the women who work on them feel or think or desire. It is in the kanthas that women and girls like Sabina and Runa still make—though they lack the elaborate designs of the early kanthas—and perhaps even more in the colorful *rumals*<sup>77</sup> and pillow coverings that young women make secretly to give to their lovers, that women’s voices can be heard, but in private, not in public.

Fig. 5.19. *Ashan* kantha with a *kalka* tree, a fertility motif. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Anisur Rahman





## NOTES

1. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 67.
2. The "n" in *kantha* is nasalized, not pronounced. However, as normally people do not use diacritic marks, the spelling "kantha" has become accepted in English. The "th" in *kantha* is soft, but the "th" in *math* is hard, the "th" being one Bangla sound, alveolar and glottal.
3. The Guide Tours takes tourists to different parts of Bangladesh, including the Sunderbans. Elizabeth Mansoor, CEO of The Guide Tours, saw the embroidered kanthas that the wives of the sailors who work on their launches made for their husbands. She asked them to make kanthas for sale for tourists who avail of their tours. On a recent trip that I took in February 2008, she showed us the quilts.
4. Interestingly, both of them referred to small rectangular kanthas to be placed on pillows as *tuwalleyes* (towels). New towels, washed to soften them, have in fact become what new mothers now use to wrap their babies in when they go outside. With the sale of disposable diapers in Bangladesh, many women no longer see the need for kanthas made of old cloth, which was both soft and absorbent. Baby kanthas have, however, become fashionable for the middle and upper class with craft shops like Aarong and Kumudini selling kanthas made of new cloth with attractive designs for children.
5. Gurusaday Dutt's papers were edited and compiled as Gurusaday Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990). His essay on the kantha, originally published in the *Modern Review*, is included in this book. Dutt divided the kantha into seven categories. He did not include the Muslim prayer rug.
6. Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1981), p. 72.
7. For an explanation of the variety of kantha stitches, see Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, 2d rev. ed. (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1993). Anne Peranteau has gone into greater detail in her essay in this volume.
8. Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993), p. 66. In the years between the first and the second edition, the kantha had become a public object. Hence the necessity for a revised edition.
9. Sen had fifty kanthas in his collection.
10. Two interleaved pages contain two composite kanthas; the first one is based on eleven kanthas and the second on eight. Sen had one of his colleagues draw pictures of kanthas in his collection, but regretted that he could not replicate the beauty of the pieces. See *Brihat Banga* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1935), pp. 430–32.
11. Jasimuddin was perhaps the first person to use the term *nakshi kantha*—in the title of his poem—interestingly enough, combining an Arabic adjective with a Bangla noun derived from Sanskrit. The term *nakshi kantha* began to be used in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in the late 1960s to denote embroidered quilts, particularly quilts from the Rajshahi area using cross-stitch on *lal salu*, a red cloth also used for what is called *sujni* in the Rajshahi area, light cotton padded quilts embroidered in back stitch using white yarn, and the thicker *lep*, heavier cotton padded quilts, sewn with large stitches to keep the cotton from lumping. Since the revival of the kantha in the mid-1980s, *nakshi kantha* is used for embroidered quilts, based on the traditional quilts using the running stitch. The term has also been taken up by people in West Bengal. Sila Basak, for example, uses it in the title of her book, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002). However, Stella Kramrisch and Gurusaday Dutt in English and Dinesh Chandra Sen in Bangla were content to use the term *kantha* to refer to the embroidered Bengal quilt. Asis Chakrabarti, former curator of Gurusaday Museum, too uses simply *kantha* in his title *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (Calcutta: Arts India Publications, 2000).
12. The main function of the Bangla Academy, set up in 1955, is the promotion and development of Bangla. It also has a considerable folklore collection, including kanthas that were mainly collected by Sayeedur, who died in 2007.
13. Sayeedur's collection includes about three hundred kanthas, mostly from Jessore.
14. In 1999 Ahmed transferred his museum to a board of trustees.
15. Tofail Ahmed, *Amader Prachin Shilpa* (Dhaka: Naoroz Kitabistan, 1964), p. 54 (author translation). From 1984 to 1987 Ahmed was involved with a Folk Crafts Survey and Design Documentation Project for Karika. Some publications that resulted from this survey greatly helped in reviving and revitalizing traditional art forms.
16. Kanthas started being collected by what was then the Dacca Museum in the late 1960s. These were not, however, put on display, but remained locked up in boxes till the museum shifted to its present premises. The Bangladesh National Museum at present has about a thousand kanthas.
17. The *alpana* became a "public" art form in the commemorations that marked Shaheed Dibash, Language Martyrs' Day, on February 21. Students of the Institute of Fine Arts—which has very recently become the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka—would draw *alpanas* on the roads around the Shaheed Minar, the Language Martyrs' Monument, located on the University of Dhaka campus, next to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.
18. See Hameeda Hossain, "Organising Women's Employment through Kantha Production," in *Woven Air: The Kantha and Muslin Tradition of Bangladesh*, ed. Paul Bonaventura and Beth Stockley (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1988), pp. 57–58; and Martha Alter Chen, "Kantha and Jamdani Revival in Bangladesh," *India International Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (December 1984).
19. Aarong, established in 1978, is the marketing outlet of BRAC, believed to be the largest nongovernmental development



organization in the world. (BRAC was originally the acronym of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, but is today generally known by the acronym only.) Aarong sells kanthas, among other craft items, supplied by its own craft centers as well as by other craft centers and vendors. The Bangla word *aarong* means a village fair. At present Aarong has eight domestic outlets (five in Dhaka, one each in Chittagong, Sylhet, and Khulna), and one franchise in London. It also exports to many European, North American, and Asian countries. Kumudini is the craft outlet of Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal Ltd., which was set up in the early 1940s to provide health and education. The Kumudini Handicrafts Centre was set up in 1980 to nurture and develop traditional Bengal crafts.

20. See the chapter on "Kantha Revival" in Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993).

21. One of the replicas was of an *ashan*, or seat, the original of which is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (see plate 9).

22. See M. M. Hoque and Seema Hoque, *Kantajee Temple: An Outstanding Temple of Late Medieval Bengal* (Dhaka: UNESCO, 2005), p. 129. The *vastraharana* is also depicted in a *pata*, a folk painting in the Gurusaday Museum Collection. See Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal*, plate 60.

23. The *kapa* was worn by women in the Rajshahi area. It consisted of two lengths of cloth, one worn below and the other on top. For a woman wearing a *kapa*, see the picture of a *dye* (midwife) by Balthazar Solvyns, reproduced in Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns and the European Image of India, 1760-1824* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press and the University of Texas Center for Asian Studies, 2004), p. 307.

24. The collection in this museum was made by Gurusaday Dutt. During the course of his administrative duties as an Indian Civil Service officer, he traveled extensively over Bengal and was able to collect and study many examples of folk art of the region. His collection, housed in the Gurusaday Museum, comprises 201 kanthas, including Manadasundari's kantha, as well as other folk artifacts. In addition to this kantha, as Katherine Hacker notes in her essay in this volume, the museum also possesses three other pieces by her.

25. However, even upper-class women knew the basic stitches of the kantha. When I was researching kanthas in the mid-1970s, one of the places I went to was Magura. When I asked Wajeda Begum, a fairly affluent woman who owned several pieces of land in the area, about kantha stitches and designs, she layered four pieces of fine white cloth from an old sari and worked neat border designs that were common in kanthas in her area. Though she did not make the kanthas for her household, she could advise what was to be made. Her daughter-in-law, Zebunnessa Majid, advises a group of women who make kanthas for sale. These kanthas are functional kanthas, meant to be used as light blankets. Though sometimes the women draw upon the border repertoire common to the area,

they prefer to use stitches that can be worked all over quickly, such as the lazy daisy and the *lik* or Holbein stitch.

26. With such details on the kantha, I had hoped to trace the family of Manadasundari but have so far failed. A trip to Mulghar, which I was led to believe was the area of Jangalbadhal, turned up several beautiful abandoned *zamindar* houses, but the only Basu family I discovered did not belong to the aristocratic upper class.

27. In Bangla, the letters "ksh" together form a distinct joint letter, with a name and a sound. When the joint letters occur in the initial position of a word, they are pronounced "kh." However, in the middle position, they form a double "k-kh" sound. Thus, the Bangla word for teacher, *shikshak*, is pronounced "shik-khak."

28. My husband's family, which comes from Nadia, West Bengal, still uses the term *sujni* rather than *kantha*.

29. See Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993), pp. 14-16. The tale of the two old women is anthologized in Niaz Zaman, *Princess Kalabati and Other Tales* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1994).

30. Also called *batua*.

31. Also called *bostani* or *gatri*.

32. Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts*, pp. 105-6.

33. Perveen Ahmed, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha: Bangladesh National Museum Collection* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997).

34. The difference between the Bangla year and the Gregorian year is 593 or 594 years, depending on the month. The Bangla year begins in April; the Bangla months begin in the middle of the Gregorian months. Thus, depending on whether the computation is for a Bangla date from Baisakh to the first half of Poush (mid-April to the end of December) or the second half of Poush to the end of Chaitra (January to mid-April), the differences will be, respectively, 593 or 594 years. Since the Bangla month has not been given here, the Gregorian year could be either 1909 or 1910.

35. The use of initials in English may also be seen in the writings of Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932), educator and author. When she signed her name in English, she often used only her initials, R. S. Hossein, whereas when she signed her name in Bangla she wrote Roquiah Khatun.

36. In her essay in this volume, "From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households," Pika Ghosh suggests that this date is of commencement. However, I believe that, like the date above, it was more likely the date of completion.

37. This inscription was deciphered with the help of Dr. Akimun Rahman, who teaches Bangla in the Department of Modern Languages, Independent University, Bangladesh. The word *iti* is used to end letters in Bangla and comes just before the writer's name.

38. Similarly, a son is also referred to lovingly as *Abbu*, *Baba*, and *Bapjan*, all meaning father.



39. The word is misspelled "touyari."
40. The name is not complete. It appears that only the first part of the name Bandyopadhyay has been given. According to Professor M. Shahjahan Mia of the Department of Bangla, University of Dhaka, who has specialized in reading manuscripts, this is a short form of the name. Personal communication, November 25, 2008.
41. See Hoque and Hoque, *Kantajee Temple*, p. 150.
42. See Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993), pp. 126–27.
43. See Hoque and Hoque, *Kantajee Temple*, p. 128.
44. The Bangla year could be 1952 or 1953 on the Gregorian calendar. See note 34 above.
45. Ritual Muslim naming ceremony where goats—one for a girl child, two for a boy child—are sacrificed while the *moulvi* or *imam*, Muslim preacher, recites verses from the Quran and pronounces the child's name.
46. The Bengali writer Rizia Rahman has a short story titled "Behesti Khancha" (The Heavenly Cage), anthologized in *Dur Kathao* (Somewhere Far Away) (Dhaka: Sahitya Bilas, 2004), pp. 49–60, in which a wife is forced to accept all the abuses heaped on her by her husband as people pronounce that her going to heaven depends on her complete subservience to her husband. Her status is, after all, at her husband's feet.
47. However, there is no *hadith* to this effect. The only *hadith* that stresses the importance of the mother and is accepted as authentic is the one cited in *Sahi Bokhari*. This narrates how a man once went to the Prophet Muhammad and asked who was the most deserving to receive his attention and care. Thrice the Prophet replied, "Your mother." Only on being asked the fourth time, did he say, "Your father" (*Sahi Bokhari*, vol. 8, bk. 73, no. 2).
48. During a visit to Chapainawabganj in early 1979, I met women of the Chapainawabganj Mahila Sangstha. Many of them told me that this type of kantha had been introduced by foreigners. Mrs. Marjina Haq of this group told me that her grandfather had cross-stitch pictures embroidered on *do-sooti* material and framed on the walls. Women from upper-class families would embroider flowers and creepers on satin with similar moral sayings to enlighten both the young woman embroidering the piece and the members of the household who would view the piece after it was framed and hung on the wall.
49. The visit to one's natal home by young women is known as *nayor*. At the end of the visit, the husband comes to take his wife back to his place. This rite is observed in Bangladesh by some communities, both Hindu and Muslim, at the beginning of the Bangla month of Bhadra, mid-August, which is also the time when the rains lessen and women put out their clothes and quilts in the sun.
50. For more on this kantha, see Ahmed, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, plate 105.
51. Until a few years ago, children were first taught the capital letters—the straight lines, for example, of A, being easier than the curves of small letters.
52. The numbers 2 and 4 are in Arabic numerals; 1 is in Bangla.
53. Professor M. Shahjahan Mia of the Department of Bangla, University of Dhaka, suggests that the name should be Shah-jalal. Personal communication, November 25, 2008.
54. Though the Rural Electrification Board was set up in Bangladesh in 1977 to provide electricity to the entire rural population by 2020, in 2002, access to electricity in Bangladesh was only about 30 percent. Although the rate is somewhat higher today, it is still unlikely that by 2020 all of Bangladesh will be provided with electricity.
55. Jasimuddin describes Shaju sewing her kantha at night. But in most Bengal villages before the coming of electricity, people would wake up with the sun and go to bed at nightfall. Dr. Akimun Rahman says that Shaju was so upset without Rupa that the kantha became her life. Personal communication, May 6, 2009.
56. A comparison of the two pieces also reveals a similarity of the central lotus of the *bostani* with one of the two lotus motifs of the *sujni*.
57. While most of the inscriptions stress piety, a good woman's devotion to her husband, and a devotee's surrender to the deity, the maker of this kantha, Shrimati Mohit Kumar Chanda, warns women to give their hearts wisely.
58. See Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993), p. 129.
59. From the Persian *zamin* for land and *dar* for holder or occupier, a *zamindar* was more than a landlord. As established by the British in India, these landowners formed a landed aristocracy in Bengal and Bihar that lasted until Indian independence in 1947.
60. See Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal*, plate 56.
61. In many instances, there were protests, resistance, or a fear of the new ways introduced by the British, especially from Muslims who felt that the British favored Hindus and that the Hindus were siding with the British, in belated revenge for centuries of Muslim rule. However, even the Muslims, led by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, who in 1875 founded the Mohammanan Anglo-Oriental College, which would in 1921 become Aligarh University, realized that English education was important. Similarly, the train, introduced to India in the mid-nineteenth century, initially to carry goods, might have entered India even if the British had not been there, but was generally seen as a positive contribution of the British. The ambivalent nature of the Indian response to the British is summed up in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's dedication to his book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (New York: Macmillan, 1951):

To the memory of the British Empire in India,  
Which conferred subjecthood upon us,  
But withheld citizenship.  
To which yet every one of us threw out the challenge:  
"Civis Britannicus sum"  
Because all that was good and living within us



Was made, shaped and quickened  
By the same British rule.

62. In her poem "I Like to See It Lap the Miles," the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson does almost the same thing, transforming the snorting, smoke-emitting monster into a tame kitten.

63. See Hoque and Hoque, *Kantajee Temple*, p. 150.

64. While the sari was indigenous, the blouse was "foreign." Older Bengal sculptures do not show women wearing stitched garments. However, at least from the eleventh century, stitched upper garments seem to have been worn occasionally, as evidenced from the manuscript painting of the Pala period, now in the Cambridge University Library, showing the four-armed Buddhist goddess Mahasahasrapramardini wearing a floral blouse—in addition to a blue floral sari. See National Craft Council of Bangladesh, *Textile Traditions of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: National Crafts Council of Bangladesh, 2006), p. 72.

65. A portrait of Nawab Khwaja Habibullah (1895–1958) with his wife, dated to the 1920s, shows the gentleman wearing a British naval uniform while his wife is wearing her sari in the new fashion with the pleats in front. Bangladesh National Museum, *Photographic Album of Old Dhaka* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 2003), p. 27. Of course, many Muslim Bengalis preferred to wear "Islamic" clothes, as also evidenced in this album.

66. The year 1952 was when the Language Movement gathered force. On February 21, as part of protests against the language policy of the government of Pakistan declaring that Urdu alone would be the state language of the country, a procession was taken out. The police fired at the crowd, killing several young men. In the procession there were several young women as well. In the years following the partition of India, many Hindus had left East Bengal/Pakistan just as many Muslims had left West Bengal. The mid-1940s and 1950s were not peaceful times, especially for Hindus in East Pakistan and Muslims in West Bengal. One wonders whether the kantha made by Parul comforted her with its established roles for men and women, with the promises of Saraswati and Durga—in the symbol of the lion—that wisdom would prevail, that evil would be conquered.

67. Women were very much part of the anti-British movement in Bengal; the armory raid in Chittagong in 1930 and the

attack on the European Club at Pahartali in 1932, for example, included women like Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddedar.

68. Curt Maury, *Folk Origins of Indian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 110. See the chapter "The Lotus Goddess," pp. 101–21.

69. Dutt relates the mandala design of the kanthas with that of the *alpanas*, suggesting that both are pre-Aryan in origin. See Dutt, *Collected Papers*, p. 107.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

71. Perveen Ahmed has studied this kantha along with other pieces; see Ahmed, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, p. 179.

72. The letter should be "y" as in *yatra* (pronounced *jatra* in Bangla). The spelling of *ya* (go) is correct.

73. The word *shala* means a wife's younger brother. It is also a term of abuse. There is no English equivalent, though the word "rascal" may come closest.

74. This kantha is based on a poster by Banchte Shikha, Jessore, which includes the ironic caption: "My wife does not work."

75. Surayia Rahman first designed kanthas for Kumudini, then for Skill Development for Underprivileged Women. A falling-out over issues of copyright led her to set up Arshi. Many would disagree with the term "kantha" for the pieces embroidered at Arshi. There is no doubt, however, that Rahman has been influenced by kantha art. A number of organizations are also adopting her methods and the embroidery stitches she used to embroider their kanthas. St. Paul's Sewing Circle in Shelabunia in Khulna District, for example, sent a number of women to be trained at Arshi. In 2006, because of failing health, Surayia Rahman gave Arshi to the Salesian Sisters, who are replicating the work of Rahman and also using many of the designs she had made during her active years.

76. See Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1993), p. 30, for a photograph of quality checkers at Kumudini examining a kantha. The girl with braids in the background was working with Banchte Shikha, Jessore, at the time and would later set up her own crafts group, Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa.

77. These *rumals* are not quilted, unlike those that Dutt lists as a kantha category. They are handkerchiefs, embroidered with floral motifs and containing inscriptions such as *Amay bhulo na* (Do not forget me) embroidered in multicolored yarn.







## A Many-Splendored Thing: Kantha Technique and Design

The name *kantha* may be applied to a range of Bengali textiles that display a variety of techniques, functions, and designs. Some are plain while others are extensively embroidered. The most humble and utilitarian of these layered and quilted textiles consists of pieced cloth—often multicolored, patterned cotton saris—held together with rows of coarsely executed running stitches, with no other decorative embroidery present. Examples of this sort are ubiquitous throughout Bengal even today, and can often be seen draped over garden fences and city walls (fig. 6.1). The most elaborate kanthas, like many in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections, display intricate needlework, rich imagery, and complex compositions. The word *nakshi*—with its roots in the Persian *naqsh* (design)—denotes the presence of figural, foliate, and/or geometric embroidery and became associated with the kanthas of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, following the publication of the Bengali poet Jasimuddin's *Nakshi Kanthar Math* in 1929.<sup>1</sup> Such *nakshi* kanthas were (and are) highly prized heirlooms, often carefully stored with neem leaves to ward away pests, and put in the sun following the monsoon season to prevent mold growth. Yet even with such care, relatively few older pieces remain, making the collections preserved in museums all the more precious.

This essay aims to introduce the materials and techniques used to produce kanthas such as those in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections, while keeping in mind issues of style and design. My research included not only an examination of works in these collections, but also a study of comparative pieces in selected collections in Bangladesh and India. The collections of the Gurusaday Museum near Kolkata and the Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka were particularly important because they include pieces with documented regional associations. A few signed and dated examples in these collections were especially useful for providing context; other pieces having imagery such as locomotives or airplanes that help to narrow their probable date of manufacture were also informative.





Fig. 6.1. Utilitarian kantha drying on bamboo scaffolding, Kolkata, 2006. Photograph by the author

Embroidered kanthas range in size from those large enough to be used as bedcovers or wraps (approximately six to seven feet long by four to five feet wide) to smaller-sized covers for infants and children—the softness of worn fabric being highly suited for this end use. Other domestic items include embroidered squares, usually just under three feet, which are often called *bostanis* (likewise *baytons* or *gattris*) if made for uses such as wrapping books, gifts, and other bundles or *ashan* if created as seating mats for special guests or for *puja* (Hindu worship). Another common form, termed *arshilata*, consists of rectangular pieces of approximately eight by twenty-four inches used to wrap mirrors (*arshi*) and other personal objects such as combs. Many other small rectangular or folded shapes functioned as, among other things, pillow covers and textile envelopes to hold sacred books or implements used in preparing *pan*, a popular digestive consumed throughout Bengal.

The diversity of kanthas arises from the fact that each is a manifestation of an individual woman's treasured ideals, learned skills, and knowledge. The techniques and designs were influenced by the array

of other textile techniques, woven as well as stitched, that came within their purview. Likewise, each of the various cultures that have been an important, if sometimes transient, presence in Bengal throughout history played a role in shaping the art of kantha-making and the women who practiced it. Region, time, family traditions, and personal history have all contributed to the unique charm of each piece. As has often been stated, no two kanthas are exactly alike; even the apparent exception to this rule, two triangular purses (called *gilafs* or *durjanis*) in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum, upon close examination were found to have been cut from the same square embroidered kantha and sewn into their present form. Nevertheless, certain patterns of construction, stitches, methods of repair, and even motifs and figures recur among kanthas.

Descriptions of embroidered kanthas typically emphasize their use of recycled cotton garments and the cotton threads pulled from these garments for quilting and embroidering lively and spontaneous motifs on the textiles' surfaces. However, the materials used to make kanthas were and are not limited to recycled cloth and cotton thread, but reflect the increasingly wide range of materials available to rural women throughout the period. The introduction and wide adoption of new materials and ideas—which can be noted, if not precisely traced, in the kanthas in these collections—makes it clear that Bengali women were interested not only in honoring tradition and displaying their skills, but also in incorporating fresh elements as they did so.<sup>2</sup>

Centuries before the first kantha appeared, the dynamic global milieu of Bengal fostered the development of several types of embroidery on cotton. Portuguese settlers arriving in the sixteenth century commissioned *colcha* quilts (popularly known as Satgaon embroideries, from the name of the Bengali port where the Portuguese first landed) from local embroiderers. These works are densely decorated with designs that include allegorical imagery, scenes from the Old Testament and classical mythology, and nonfigural ornamentation. They were usually worked in chain, running, and knot stitches with yellow wild silk on undyed cotton and, like kanthas, were reinforced with running stitches throughout the



background. Rosemary Crill has described two late-sixteenth-century textiles made in Bengal for the Western market, padded and quilted like the Portuguese *colcha* but sharing with the kantha a more limited range of stitches and polychromatic and naïvely styled figures.<sup>3</sup> *Chikankari*, delicate whitework embroidery on cotton emphasizing floral motifs, developed under the dual influences of the floral designs often used in *jamdani* (the sheer figured weavings indigenous to Bengal), and a European whitework embroidery technique called Dresden work, popular in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Coarser *kashida* embroidery, worked in cotton or wild *muga* silk on cotton, was manufactured in Kashmir for the markets of the Middle East.

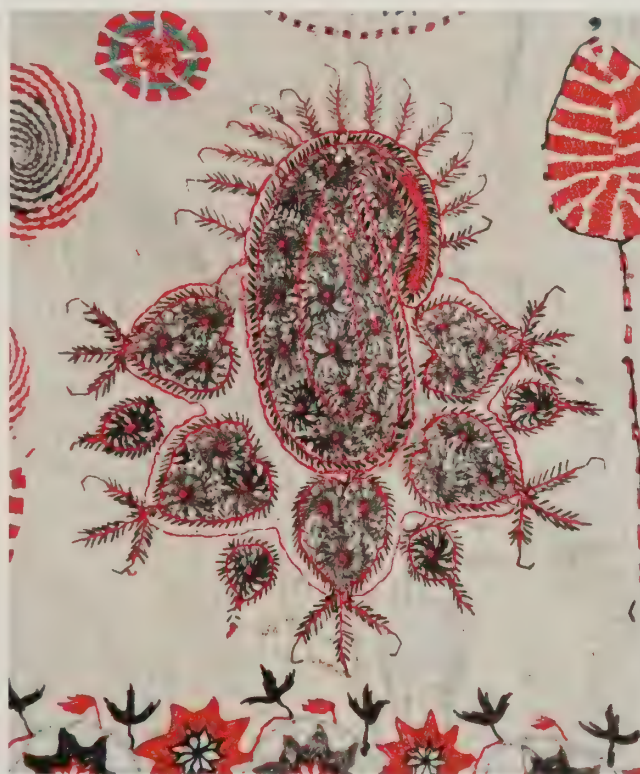
According to John Taylor's 1851 treatise on cotton textile production in Dhaka, many of the techniques used to embroider these textiles grew from the work of the Muslim craftsmen who were often the professional darners (*rafugars*) and muslin embroiderers (*zardozi* and *chikandozi*) in their communities. Taylor described darners who could "extract a thread twenty yards long from a piece of the finest muslin of the same dimensions and replace it with one of the finest quality,"<sup>5</sup> and who were also responsible for embroidering weavers' marks on woven cloth. These skills, in conjunction with a prohibition against the wearing of silk by Muslim men,<sup>6</sup> fostered the development of sophisticated techniques of embroidery on cotton. These textiles made use of many of the same stitches as the kantha and some *chikankari*, even utilizing threads pulled from older woven cloth in preference to embroidery yarns.<sup>7</sup>

Out of this fertile context the kantha developed and continued to evolve in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The techniques used to create kanthas, based on the process of reusing and darning worn cloth, later gave rise to the sophisticated repertoire of motifs based on the running stitch. The kantha also became a medium for displaying fancy interlacing stitches, cross stitches, herringbone, and others alongside the more traditional running and pattern darning stitches. In addition, wool yarns and new cloth were incorporated as British imports determined to a greater extent the materials available for piecing and embroidering

kanthas.<sup>8</sup> The British elite in Bengal also brought with them their favored styles of needlework and furnishings, some of which were adopted by the Bengali elite (Bhadralok), for whom such styles represented both modernity and status. For example, the Marchioness of Dalhousie completed several landscapes and Old Testament scenes in needlepoint using brightly colored wool as she followed her husband, the Governor General of India, on his business trips during his tenure (1848–56).<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps more important for the kantha makers were the internal migrations of people into Bengal from other regions of India, particularly from the large areas grouped under British rule into the single Punjab Province, including the Punjab Native States (a region more or less encompassed today by Pakistan's Punjab Province and the Indian states of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana). According to census records these Punjabi immigrants were frequently employed as wool cloth and shawl dealers.<sup>10</sup> Such exchanges of goods and techniques may help to explain why stitches and patterns used in kanthas (fig. 6.2) also appear in nineteenth-century embroidered *amli* shawls. This embroi-

Fig. 6.2. Fern stitching worked in black thread completes the *kalka* motif shown here. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka  
Photograph by Darielle Mason





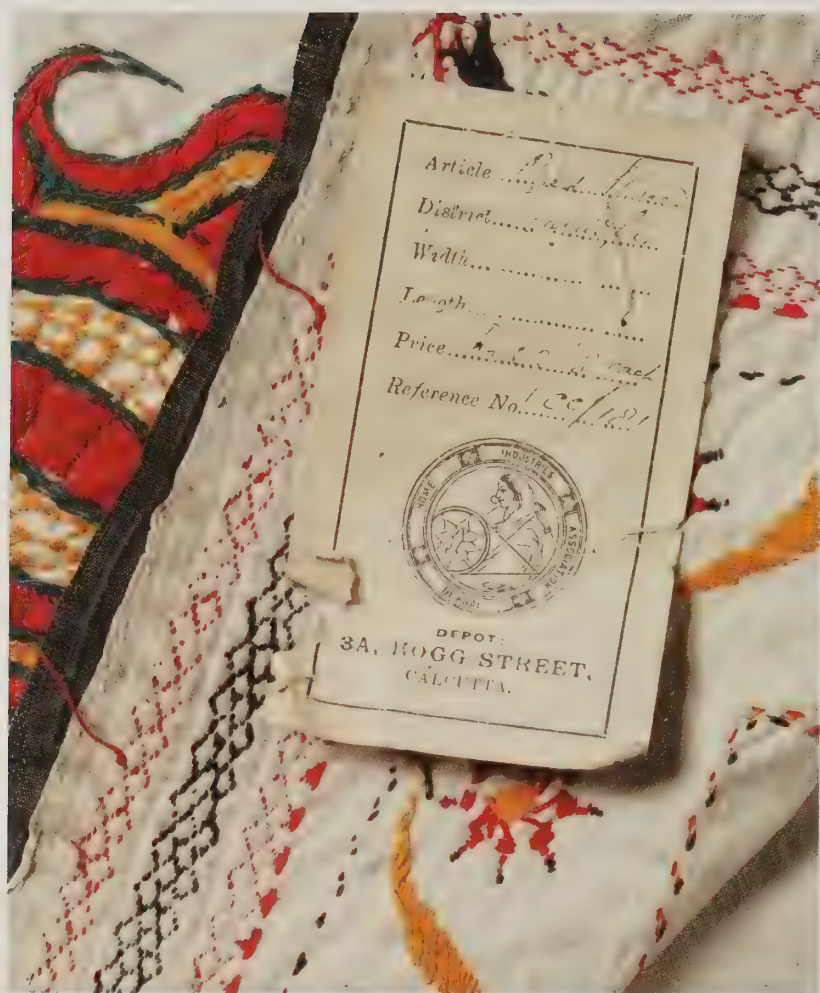


Fig. 6.3. The paper label attached to this piece provides evidence that kanthas and other types of folk embroidery were sold at Hogg Market in Calcutta as early as 1920. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

dered type of “Kashmir shawl” developed thanks to excessive demand for the woven (*kani*) variety. To increase production, the loom width was narrowed and bits of pattern cut out and pieced together with fine embroidery by the *rafugars* (darners). Soon these skilled needleworkers began to replicate the entire woven pattern. Both *amli* and *kani* shawls fell out of favor in the West during the third quarter of the nineteenth century with the availability of cheap Scottish (Paisley) and French woven imitations. As the market shifted, the shawl embroiderers found employment decorating other domestic textiles as well as items for the tourist trade.<sup>11</sup> The embroidery of immigrant populations was also noted in the 1883 Calcutta Exposition report: “the best embroidery which is executed in [Bengal] is of foreign origin, being the work of artists from

the North-West provinces and elsewhere who have settled in Behar [Bihar].”<sup>12</sup>

The availability at market of these embroideries by displaced people in Bengal may have inspired new designs in the kanthas. Likewise, as the ever-improving rail network more closely connected once-distant populations, embroideries from other regions may have inspired a different aesthetic in early twentieth-century kantha embroidery. A large, relatively plain kantha in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, dated to around 1920–23, has a paper tag attached to it printed with the logo of Bengal Home Industries<sup>13</sup> identifying the textile as a bed-cover for sale (fig. 6.3). This suggests that during the time in which kanthas such as those in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections were being made for domestic use, others—and perhaps many types of embroideries—were being made for the market.

As has been discussed in other essays in this volume (see especially Hacker, “Living Traditions”), the 1930s saw a growing appreciation of kanthas by members of Bengal’s urban intelligentsia, for whom they came to embody regional identity and pride; even today the kantha worn by Rabindranath Tagore is displayed beside his *kurta* in a gallery at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata devoted to exhibiting his work. Spurred in part by the national pride of a maturing Bangladesh, institutions such as the Bangladesh National Museum have begun to acquire and display modern pieces that represent a commercial revival of this craft tradition over the past several decades. Although some are based on earlier kanthas in museum collections, these revival pieces are usually identifiable as such, often having a limited range and number of motifs arranged very symmetrically on thin power loom sheet cloth, embroidered in brightly colored rayon thread.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art has in its possession more than fifty kanthas donated by Stella Kramrisch, the majority collected between 1921 and 1950 during her residency in Calcutta, and many known to have been in her possession before 1939. In her various publications, she dated many of these pieces to between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and noted their place of manufacture as areas that now fall primarily within the nation of



Bangladesh. Many of the Bonovitz pieces likely also originate from this period, but their relatively recent acquisition makes dating even more difficult (see, e.g., Mason, "Background Texture," this volume).

### Kantha Making

The process of making a kantha began with joining together pieces of cotton cloth using a running stitch. As discussed in more detail below, the cloth was often repurposed from worn garments. Kramrisch and others have explored the spiritual significance of the piecing of old cloth as a metaphor for regeneration, but there is also pragmatism inherent in this practice. Authors of nineteenth-century Bengali household instruction manuals extolled the virtues of quilt-making: "But just see how many useful things wise, hard-working housewives can make from [a torn shawl]! Cut off and discard the torn parts of the shawl's border and repair the torn middle sections; then if the shawl is put into a cover from old fabric it makes an attractive quilt for a young boy. And this quilt should not be thrown away even when it gets torn—fold it, sew coloured fabric over that fold and it makes a pretty, soft *katha* quilt for a young boy's bed."<sup>14</sup> Colored fabric was specified for making repairs because it was better at hiding soiling.

Certainly the virtue and economy of reusing cloth were powerful motivators underlying the choice of materials, but it was not at the expense of making an attractive finished product, particularly in the case of the embroidered kantha. Although kanthas made up of as many as two dozen worn fragments exist in the Kramrisch Collection (fig. 6.4), the majority of those studied in museum and private collections displayed minimal piecing of cloth. In addition, the individual cloths that were used appear, for the most part, to have been completely intact and in good condition when the quilt was made. When multiple small pieces were used, they were often clustered on the back of the textile, with the better pieces reserved for the front, leaving it smoother and with fewer seams, small holes, or other flaws.

Three shapes of kanthas predominate in the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections—large rectangles, mid-sized squares, and small, narrow rectangles—and the piecing, construction, and decoration of



Fig. 6.4. Backlit photograph of plate 22, showing where the individual pieces of cloth were stitched together to make this kantha

these shapes will be the primary focus here. The first of these requires large pieces of cloth, and such kanthas appear to have been made primarily from unstitched garments (most often saris and dhotis). The construction of such large quilts follows a consistent pattern of joining two cloths together along their lengths by a single seam (see plate 67). The wider piece ranges from 30 to 35 inches (76.2 to 88.9 cm) in width, while the narrower piece or pieces can be anywhere from 5 to 15 inches (12.7 x 38.1 cm) wide. Together they create an overall width of 45 to 55 inches (114.3 x 139.7 cm). Usually the seam can be seen on both obverse and reverse, but rather than being superimposed the two are offset to avoid a prominent ridge along the seam line.

The exact dimensions of the pieces of this template depended not only on the widths of the saris and dhotis used, but also on the widths of their woven borders since, in most cases, these borders were





Fig. 6.5. Detail of plate 68. The curving floral patterns on the woven cloth border differ from the simple geometric borders imitated by embroidered pattern darning.



Fig. 6.6. Detail of plate 31. Embroidered borders on kanthas often imitate simple geometric patterns like that shown on this woven example.

removed before the cloth was pieced. Thus, a wider border made for a narrower piece of plain cloth and vice versa. After the borders were removed and the sections stitched together, two to five layers of this pieced cloth were arranged on top of one another. Then their edges were turned or hemmed toward the inside, and the layers were secured with several rows of long running stitches. Many of the smaller kanthas are not pieced but consist of a single cloth without any woven border, folded in half to create a double-layered textile. Unlike the cloth obtained from old saris and dhotis, which displays frayed edges where the border has been torn off, the edges of this folded cloth often display selvages (plain, finished woven edges). Such a borderless cloth may originally have served as a shawl, towel, or other domestic linen, indicating that kantha-makers utilized almost every kind of household textile available.

Following the piecing and layering of the ground cloth, preparatory underdrawing might be done to guide the embroidery. Often the underdrawing shows beneath or adjacent to the embroidery as lines of varying thickness with feathered or wicked edges, suggesting a thin substance applied by hand rather than block printed. Pencil, charcoal, ink, and dye in shades of red, black, and blue have all been documented and can be found on many of the Kramrisch and Bonovitz pieces (see, e.g., plates 22, 35, 76).<sup>15</sup> In some cases, no underdrawing is found below the embroidered figures, but there is a grid of lines to encourage symmetry.

Next came the most time-consuming step in the process of creating a kantha—embroidering the cloth. Woven designs at the edges of the sari or other cloth used often became the basis for the embroidered designs along the perimeter of the kantha. Such borders, called *par*, could be repeated, moving inward in smaller and smaller rectangles or squares to cover the entire surface of the cloth (see plate 74) or even to generate figural motifs (see plate 77). Sometimes, however, the makers took shortcuts and simply pieced borders of woven cloth along the edges of the finished kantha. These intact woven borders often contain curvilinear floral or *kalka* (paisley) shapes (fig. 6.5), rather than the simpler, more traditional geometric patterns (fig. 6.6) commonly imitated in the embroidered borders.





(During the nineteenth century, complex designs became cheaper to produce due to advances in loom technology.) After embroidering the motifs and borders, the maker would fill the field of negative space with rows of running stitches (fig. 6.7), sometimes as many as eighteen per inch. As can be seen on many pieces, especially in the Bonovitz Collection, such dense background texturing more commonly seems to be worked into larger pieces, perhaps because smaller ones could be held together by the motifs alone. However, this texturing does appear fairly frequently even on smaller pieces (see, e.g., plates 6, 7, 9), the rows of stitching producing soft undulations across the fabric's surface. During the process of embroidering the designs, the cloth was not tensioned (not placed, for example, on an embroidery hoop) but held in the hand, thus exaggerating the three-dimensionality made by stitching the loosely bunched cloth. This method of working produced, among other motifs, a densely stitched central lotus that is raised or peaked at its center (see plate 52). In addition to the embroidered border designs or applied cloth borders just described, the edges of each kantha are frequently oversewn with buttonhole stitches (fig. 6.8), sometimes using two or more colors of thread.

As straightforward as this description of kanthamaking may seem, study of any sizeable collection of these textiles reveals that women created myriad expressions within this form by their different choices of base cloth, thread, and stitch types.

### Kantha Cloth

The contrast of elaborate, colored stitchwork on a plain background gives these highly ornamented kanthas their strength and clarity. Some kantha makers even bleached the used cloth to enhance the contrast.<sup>66</sup> The availability of inexpensive, undyed cotton cloth was a precondition, if not a catalyst, for such works. This supple, handloom-woven fabric was valued for its softness, and also because the loose weave enabled subtle textures to be imparted to the layered cloth. The pieced foundation of each kantha was valued for its drape and feel, as well as for the memories its parts evoked among family members.

Cloth has long been a central commodity in the region. During the late nineteenth century, however, local handloom weavers struggled against a tide of cheap British imports priced for sale to colonial subjects, as well as domestically made power-loom goods. As economic historian Sujit Kumar Das writes, the handloom industry was "the largest organized industry of India and the symbol of its cultural heritage [and it] faced the threat of annihilation."<sup>67</sup> By the end of the century, the inexpensive power-loom sari had replaced certain handloom products, and handloom cottons increasingly were made using mill-spun yarn, rendering both professional and domestic spinning obsolete.

Whether hand- or machine-loomed, the plain, undyed sari was the garment worn by the vast majority of Bengali women regardless of age, economic

Fig. 6.7. Detail of plate 49. Running stitches impart texture to the surface of this kantha

Fig. 6.8. Detail of plate 16. Buttonhole stitching can be found at the edges of many kanthas





Fig. 6.9. Fragments of a sari border collected in Calcutta by a British government worker around 1865. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

status, or social-religious affiliations. All regions in India and Bangladesh have characteristic sari patterns and color combinations, as well as different styles of wrapping and wearing them, and Bengal is no exception. While the Bengali method of draping the sari by bringing the more ornamental end piece to hang in front of the body is still seen today, although less and less frequently, the great variety of fabrics now available has overshadowed what was the standard garb of the vast majority of Bengali women throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth. White saris with colored borders are often incorporated into kanthas (fig. 6.9). These historic handloom products of the Indian states of West Ben-

gal and Bihar have been documented extensively by, among others, Rta Kapur Chishti, who wrote:

It is from villages like Niroi [in West Bengal] that we learn of the pristine and universal basis of the sari known as the *Maatha paar*, literally an unbleached plain body with coloured borders. The stark, flat-coloured border delineates the drape of the sari and suddenly the wearing style and the functional utility of a heavy coarse-count sari worn traditionally without the *saya* or petticoat, make perfect sense. Its strength and simplicity are ideally suited for women working ankle deep in rice fields or going about their domestic chores.

At Niroi, they remember that . . . the wearing of white was considered decorous. The *Maatha paar* is known by different names in different places. The Muslims call it *Churi-daar paar* or bangle-like bordered. . . . There is also the *Pheeta paar* with a narrow ribbon-like border, probably the cheapest in the range of *Maatha paar* saris. The fine border probably provides the symbolic dividing line between widows who customarily wore all-white saris without borders.<sup>18</sup>

The myriad variations of the “*maatha paar*” sari differed in the fineness or coarseness of the weave, the complexity and pattern of border designs, and the specific area where they were produced. Fine, diaphanous *dhonekali* or *shantipuri* saris, so named for towns in Bengal, might have very thin yarns (72 to 96 per inch), with a more open weave structure. In contrast, coarser cloth saris would tend to have wider and heavier yarns (36 to 56 per inch), yielding a denser material. Coarse-count saris would have been used for everyday wear, such as for working in rice fields, as the above quote suggests, whereas the diaphanous high-count saris would have been worn by Hindu women for special occasions.<sup>19</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, mill-made cloth often replaced coarse-count saris and then was recycled into kanthas—not only because it was cheap, but also because it had appeal as a fashion item. Although not in the context of Bengal, such appeal was noted in 1898 by Edgar Thurston, Superintendent of the Madras Museum:

Quite recently I was shocked by the appearance of a member of my staff in a new patch-work white shirt adorned



with no less than six individual and distinct trade-marks, representing the Prince of Wales, Britannia, an elephant, &c. A native of the labouring classes, when clad in plain white loin cloth stained with indigenous seruver dye, and white or seruver-red turban is, to my mind, far better dressed than when his turban is dyed with Turkey-red and the loin-cloth is of white imported fabric with the much-prized trade-mark, or replaced by unseemly pantaloons made of some gaudy imported piece goods.<sup>20</sup>

In the kanthas examined, fine handwoven cloth with 68 to 80 warps per inch appeared most frequently, although some had as few as 58 or as many as 114 threads per inch. A few examples I documented, some said to be from the Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, were made of a dense, compact cloth known as *kapa*. *Kapa* is a plain weave cloth with warps and wefts interlacing in pairs, an arrangement sometimes called a basket weave. This lends the fabric weight, durability, and warmth. Such a fabric would have been an advantage in the northern parts of this region, which extends into the Himalayan foothills. A few other pieces proved to be made from power-loom mill cloth. Similarly, of the more than one hundred pieces from the Bangladesh National Museum collection published by Perveen Ahmad, she lists only a handful as made of mill cloth, all of them dated after 1915, whereas those made using handloom-woven cloth she dates from as early as 1830 to as late as 1950.<sup>21</sup> While inconclusive, these findings suggest that, at least before the modern-day kantha revival, mill cloth never completely replaced handloom cloth. Because the use of mill cloth in a kantha suggests a later date, it is helpful to be able to

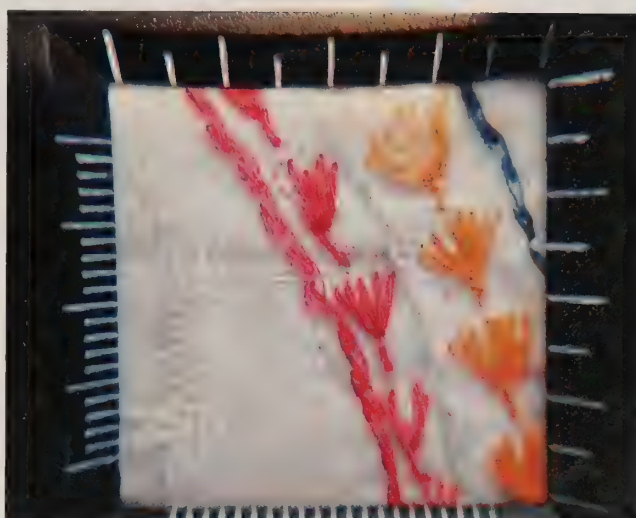


Fig. 6.10. Detail of plate 4  
Paired threads and other flaws  
in woven cloth can help identify  
it as having been woven  
on a handloom rather than an  
automated power loom

distinguish it from handloom cloth.<sup>22</sup> The presence of undulating or wavy selvages dotted with regularly spaced tiny holes (so-called temple marks), along with the texture of the weft or warp patterning, can sometimes indicate handloom production; however, because of the nature of the kantha cloth—usually without borders or patterning—these traits cannot be relied upon. Other indicators are the occasional minor irregularities in the weave, such as paired warps, that can be seen most readily throughout the unembroidered areas of the kantha (fig. 6.10).

In the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum is a square kantha intended as a wrapping for loose items. While the body of this textile is constructed of mill cloth, it has a handloom-woven border sewn to the corner to serve as the tie or cord. This use of both handwoven and mill cloth on a single kantha

Figs. 6.11, 6.12. Tightly woven  
and compact mill cloth has  
been used to make this  
square kantha; a small piece  
of handloom cloth attached at  
the corner enables the tex-  
tures to be compared  
Bangladesh National  
Museum, Dhaka

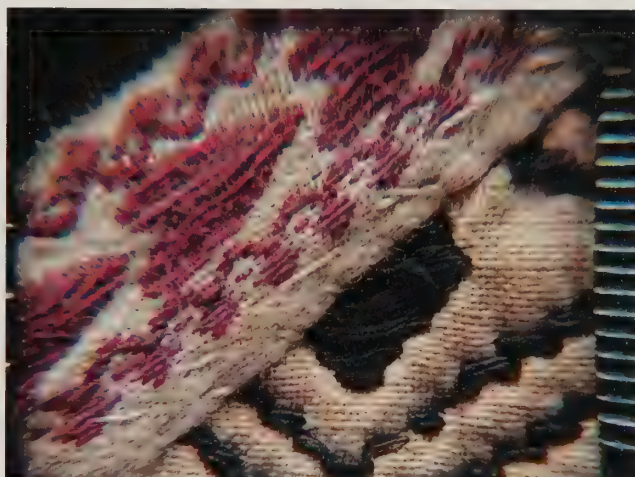






Fig. 6.13. Detail of plate 19. The simple running stitch has been used to create a variety of effects along the border of this kantha

not only enables direct comparison of the two types of cloth, but also gives insight into how the choice of cloth may have influenced aesthetic choices (figs. 6.11, 6.12). The small bit of handloom border is loosely woven, its open structure imparting a suppleness that makes it perfectly suited for embroidery. The mill cloth, on the other hand, is more compact and thus slightly more rigid; the running stitches worked throughout the background do not produce the exquisite three-dimensionality found on kanthas made of handwoven fabric. Whatever mill cloth lacked in terms of working properties, however, its presence and affordability meant that kanthas could be made at minimal expense even when handloom fabric from worn garments was unavailable. The textiles produced since the late 1970s as part of the commercial kantha revival are usually made of power-loom cloth for this reason. However, as the remark by Thurston quoted above indicates, mill cloth may also have been stitched into kanthas as either new or recycled material because of the prestige attached to industrial and imported products.

Given their apparent ages, origins, and patterns of use, it is perhaps somewhat surprising to discover that many kanthas exist in very good condition, with

few or no tears or holes on the surface. Of course, some collections and individual pieces I examined were housed in museums not long after their manufacture and thus subjected to minimal wear. However, the relatively good condition of many kanthas also provides evidence of their makers' self-conscious efforts to create something beautiful as well as useful. Often only the best sections of the worn garment were used. Torn pieces may have been layered on the interior, out of sight. When repairs were necessary, either during or after completion, the cloth often was carefully darned or patched by recycling pieces from another kantha. Losses are covered with sections of similarly embroidered cloth, or plain cloth is re-embroidered with designs that make the repairs virtually invisible (see, e.g., plates 56, 80). Indeed, as it became more readily available, inexpensive mill cloth may have grown in favor in part because it did not require such laborious preliminary repairs.

### Kantha Stitches

One of the most defining and remarkable characteristics of the kantha is the unique way it exploits the versatility of the simple running stitch. (For diagrams of various types of stitches used in kanthas, see the Appendix on p. 155.) In plain kanthas, rows of stitches serve primarily to darn the cloth, reinforcing it for further use.<sup>23</sup> In ornamental kanthas the running stitch is used to yield not only textured background effects but also to outline and fill individual motifs. At times the stitching is done in such a way as to give the same appearance on both the front and back of the textile, a quality called *dorukha* (*do* = two; *rukha* = face, direction).

The small motifs near the edge of a kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (fig. 6.13) were created using running stitches and are separated by running stitch outlines. The wider red, yellow, and blue border below them has been worked in pattern-darning stitches, or rows of running stitches in imitation of woven sari border patterns. The simplicity of the border and other designs belies the skill and precision these shapes require; each section of the wheel begins with stitches that must be exactly equidistant to achieve the proper symmetry and balance





between the positive and negative space. In many kanthas, especially the larger pieces, closely spaced rows of running stitches are laid throughout the background, placed so that the stitches in each row are adjacent, rather than alternating, which gathers the cloth between the stitches up into soft ridges. Variations in the way the running stitch is rendered, the length of the stitch, and the ply or thickness of the yarn contribute to the overall visual impression of the embroidered design.

A comparison of two pieces in the Kramrisch Collection reveals the significant visual differences this variation can produce, ranging from graceful linearity to bold, solid masses of form. The contrast can be explained partly in terms of materials used. On the first piece (fig. 6.14), the delicate lines of the red and blue embroidery are worked in small stitches using fine thread. In addition, these threads are plied together<sup>24</sup> in greater or lesser numbers as needed for the composition; more threads are joined to produce a thicker line, such as for the architectural elements, while fewer threads are used to produce a finer line for facial features and other delicate details. In the

second piece (fig. 6.15), the woman and her surroundings have been depicted more uniformly, with longer and wider stitches.

In other kanthas, the impression of a wider stitch is further enhanced by crimping in the yarn, an effect most likely produced by pulling apart a plied yarn to give two finer strands (fig. 6.16). While threads used for some kantha work may have been pulled out of finely woven sari borders and twisted

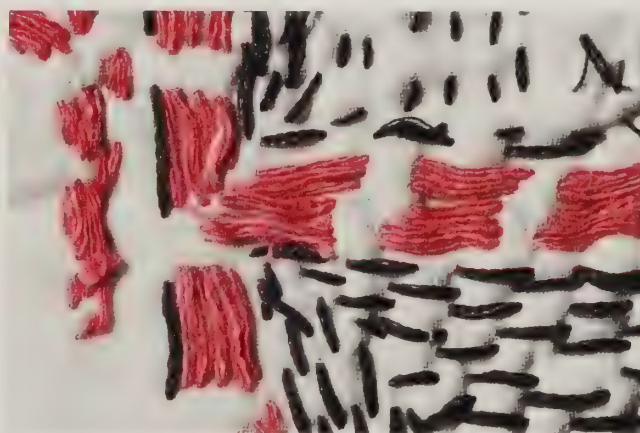


Fig. 6.14. Detail of plate 29. The use of different thicknesses of yarn allows for variation in the lines in this kantha; from two to six individual strands have been spun together to form the yarn

Fig. 6.15. Detail of plate 84. Here, the larger, longer embroidery stitches worked in an array of colors of thicker yarn create forms that are heavier and blockier compared to those on the kantha shown in fig. 6.14

Fig. 6.16. Detail of plate 44. Crimping can result when a twisted or plied yarn is pulled apart to separate its individual strands, contributing to the heavier appearance of the embroidery in some kanthas



Fig. 6.17. The second campaign of embroidery in this small rectangular kantha demonstrates the heavier embroidery and wider variety of color that often characterize later kanthas. Courtesy of the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata



Fig. 6.18. Detail of a *galicha* in *lal shalu* (red cloth) with designs executed in cross stitches, c. 1970. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Dr. David R. Nalin and Dr. Richard Nalin, 1998-102-8

Fig. 6.19. Detail of a *sujni* kantha using *lal shalu* with back-stitched designs in white yarn. Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka. Photograph by Darielle Mason

together as needed, close examination of a range of pieces indicates that this practice was used alongside or perhaps superseded by the practice of pulling apart thicker two-ply threads that had never been woven into fine-count handloom cloth.

The second Bonovitz kantha discussed above (see plate 84; fig. 6.15) also displays a greater range of bright colors, likely imported yarn dyed with artificial dyes that came to be preferred by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Kramrisch and others have contended that earlier kanthas are more likely to have a limited number of shades,<sup>26</sup> their strict blue, red, and

black palette resulting from the use of threads pulled from *matha par saris*. On some kanthas, additional colors may have been added at a later date. A kantha in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum, for example, includes an animal caravan embroidered in bright blue, green, yellow, and red, with long running stitches in wide bands. This design is completed over a previous, more linear design worked only in red and black. The later campaign of embroidery displays the blocky, vividly colored forms that appear to have been typical of later kanthas (fig. 6.17). Other kanthas, including some in the Gurusaday Museum and in the Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka, incorporate orange, hot pink, and purple wool yarns and even silk floss, materials that were not or could not be used in sari borders, thus providing even more conclusive evidence that pulled threads were not always used. Although personal preference clearly influenced the choice of color and yarn, the wider selection of yarns that became available also instigated aesthetic changes.

Like the quality of the yarn used, the type of stitch could also render a line blocky or fine. The simple running stitch is the foundation of the kantha technique and the basis of pattern-darned (*chatai*) border designs and motifs.<sup>27</sup> Other stitches, such as the chain stitch occasionally seen in kanthas, also appear in other types of historic needlework from Bengal such as the *chikankari* and the *colcha* quilts mentioned previously. When used to outline motifs,







the wider lines produced by such stitches create a bolder effect for the entire composition.

Other stitching techniques came to be used by the needlewomen of Bengal, either by introduction or by innovation, to decorate the surfaces of their kanthas. These included, most commonly, back, buttonhole, satin, dot, eye, zig-zag (and its variations), seed, chain, fern, and cross stitches. While we cannot correlate particular stitches with the adjacent regions of Faridpur, Khulna, and Jessore that Kramrisch gives as the origins for many of her works (see Mason, "Background Texture," this volume, for a discussion of geographic specificity and the issue of changing borders), scholars have equated specific techniques with other regions, such as the northerly Rajshahi Division.<sup>28</sup> Several types of kanthas from this area are characterized by the use of a power-loom cloth known as *lal shalu* (red cloth). The first has designs executed entirely in cross stitches (fig. 6.18) and is sometimes called a *galicha* (carpet kantha). *Lal shalu* also serves as the foundation of another kantha type from Rajshahi termed *sujni*, which displays repeating linear ornamental motifs, usually worked in backstitches with white yarn (fig. 6.19). The so-called *lochori* ("wave") kanthas, said to originate from the same area, are worked in running stitches on sturdy, undyed *kapa* cloth.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 6.20. Detail of the front of plate 77 showing wheels created by pattern darning

Fig. 6.21. The pattern-darned wheels on plate 77 as they appear on the reverse

Fig. 6.22. Detail of plate 60, showing bending stitches

As noted above, the running stitch is the basis of most kantha embroidery. Several rows worked adjacent to one another are called darning and can either be offset or parallel. Darning stitches result in ridges in the surface of the cloth, as seen on the lotus petals in a kantha in the Kramrisch Collection (see fig. 6.7). When running stitches are used to fill in or create motifs, they are often worked to yield patterns that imitate woven designs. Wheel motifs are stitched in successive concentric rows and often appear again on

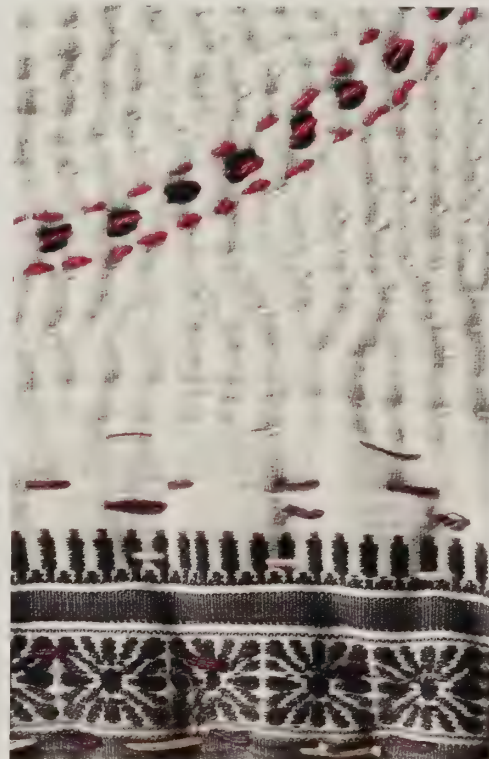


Fig. 6.23. Detail of plate 37.  
The figures are delicately rendered in minute backstitches.

Fig. 6.24. Detail of reverse  
of section shown in fig. 6.23

Fig. 6.25. Detail of plate 56  
showing the thickness of line  
created by chain stitching

Fig. 6.26. Detail of reverse  
of section shown in fig. 6.25.  
The chain stitching appears  
very different on the reverse  
of the textile





the reverse of the kantha (figs. 6.20, 6.21). When the stitches are set slightly behind those preceding them it is called bending stitch, or *kaitya* (fig. 6.22). When the stitches are directly next to each other, it is called pattern darning, or *chatai*.<sup>30</sup> Running stitches are sometimes used to outline motifs, with two sets worked in sequence to give a fine narrow line that appears the same on the front and back of the textile.

The outline stitch is commonly used to outline motifs, and its reverse resembles a double running stitch. The delicate dancing figures embroidered on a square Kramrisch kantha are rendered in minute backstitches, about ten per inch (fig. 6.23). Chain-stitch outlines in red and black, seen just above the pieced border of another kantha, create a wider line than a running stitch or outline stitch, enhanced further here by the use of relatively thick embroidery yarn (figs. 6.24, 6.25). As has been noted, the edges of small, square kanthas are often finished with button-hole stitching, occasionally with blue and red threads that have been twisted together (see fig. 6.8).

In the Kramrisch and Bonovitz collections alone, forty-three different stitches have been identified. A number of these rarely appear on kanthas, suggesting that they might have been borrowed from other embroidery traditions. One example is the fern stitch that sometimes appears along the edges of *kalka* (paisley) motifs, giving them a fringed look (fig. 6.27). When the fern stitch is used as a filling stitch on kanthas, it mimics those used on *amli* shawls (see fig. 6.2).

In addition to their intricate construction and startling beauty, kanthas provide us with a valuable archive of changes in Bengali dress and the regional textile market. The cloths of which kanthas are composed, mostly garments used and worn during the period in which these quilts were made, are a physical record of the everyday lives of Bengalis, as well as an expression of their individual and group identity. A better understanding of the materials and techniques used to create the kanthas in these collections will, it is hoped, contribute to a deeper appreciation of the links between cloth and culture in Bengal during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



#### NOTES

*Acknowledgments:* Many people have been instrumental in helping me complete this research, and I am grateful for their guidance and assistance. I especially thank Niaz Zaman for sharing her expertise on this topic, and for being so willing to accompany me around Dhaka in the heat, making introductions and patiently answering my many questions. Finally, I am grateful to the many anonymous women who made kanthas, for leaving us such a rich testament to the importance of beauty in life.

1. E. M. Milford, *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt: A Tale of Two Indian Villages*. Translated from the Bengali Poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math of Jasimuddin* (London and Calcutta: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1939). The poem was written while Jasimuddin was studying under Dinesh Chandra Sen at the University of Calcutta.
2. The modern plastic mats that are referred to as kanthas by their owners further exemplify the object's tendency to resist classification. See Pika Ghosh, "From Rags to Riches," in this volume.
3. Rosemary Crill, "The Earliest Survivors? The Indian Embroideries at Hardwick Hall," in *Textiles from India: The Global Trade*, ed. Rosemary Crill (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2006), pp. 245–60.
4. Sheila Paine, *Chikan Embroidery: The Floral Whitework of India* (Aylesbury, UK: Shire Publications Ltd., 1989).

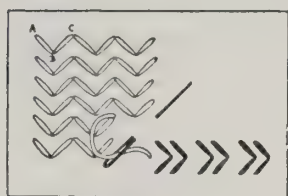
Fig. 6.27. Detail of plate 25 showing *kalka* (paisley) motifs fringed with fern stitching, with fly stitching between the *kalkas*



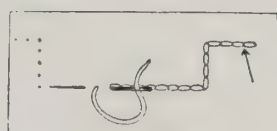
5. John Taylor, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Cotton Manufacture of Dacca, in Bengal by a Former Resident of Dacca* (London: John Mortimer, 1851), p. 102.
6. Satarupa Dutta Majumder, "Satgaon Quilts: A Study," in *Textiles from India: The Global Trade*, ed. Rosemary Crill (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2006), pp. 317–28.
7. Paine, *Chikan Embroidery*, p. 33.
8. Sila Basak describes these yarns as "coloured threads from British days" and "hali threads from British days" in her *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007), pp. 155, 165.
9. Margaret Swain, *Historical Needlework* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), p. 103.
10. Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Internal Migration in India: A Case Study of Bengal* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1987), pp. 329–31, citing census records from 1901.
11. John Irwin, *Shawls: A Study in Indo-European Influences* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1955).
12. *The Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883–84* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885), vol. 1, p. 111.
13. The Bengal Home Industries is a Kolkata-based nonprofit organization that was founded in 1917 by the wife of Bengal's colonial governor, Lord Carmichael.
14. Judith Walsh, *How to Be the Domestic Goddess of Your Home: An Anthology of Bengali Domestic Manuals* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), p. 204.
15. Niaz Zaman describes a modern-day process of tracing kantha designs on the cloth prior to embroidering them using a mixture of laundry bluing and kerosene. Similar substances may have been used in the past. Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, 2d rev. ed. (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1993), p. 33.
16. Kalyan Kumar Ganguli, "Kantha—the Enchanted Wrap," *Indian Folk Lore*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1958), p. 5.
17. Sujit Kumar Das, *The Warp and Woof: An Enquiry into the Handloom Industry in West Bengal* (Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi, 2001), p. 23.
18. Martand Singh and Rta Kapur Chishti, eds., *Saris of India*, vol. 2, *Bihar and West Bengal* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Ltd., National Institute of Fashion Technology and Amr Vastra Kosh), p. 4.
19. Zulekha Haque, "Sari: Cotton and Silk," in *Textile Traditions of Bangladesh*, 2d ed. (Dhaka: National Crafts Council of Bangladesh, 2006), p. 77.
20. Edgar Thurston, "The Cotton Fabric Industry of the Madras Presidency," *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* (1896), p. 21.
21. Perveen Ahmad, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997).
22. I am grateful to Rahul Jain for lending his tremendous insight on this subject.
23. For more on traditional repair techniques in India, see Priya Ravesh Mehra, "An Invisible Craft," in *Recovering the Past: The Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Textiles*, ed. Emilia Cortes and Suzanne Thomassen-Krauss (N.p.: Preprints of the North American Textile Conservation Conference, 2005), pp. 171–75.
24. From two to six fine threads are twisted together to create single embroidery yarn.
25. By 1896, the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* claimed of the dyeing industry in Bengal: "Whatever degree of perfection dyeing may have attained in past times, at the present day it does not occupy a prominent place in the list of industries in this country. The importation of cheap European goods and European aniline dyes is proving fatal to the indigenous dyeing industry of these Provinces. . . . European dyes which are not as fast as indigenous dyes, appear to commend themselves to the people of this country on account of their cheapness and their brilliancy of colour." N. N. Banerjei, "Dyes and Dyeing in Bengal," *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* (1896), pp. 1–20.
26. Stella Kramrisch, "Kanthā," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* (1939), p. 152 (reprinted in this volume).
27. For additional information on the Bengali names of specific stitched patterns, see Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, pp. 44–59.
28. For a discussion of regional differences among kanthas, see *ibid.*, pp. 124–38.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10, 115–16.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–50.



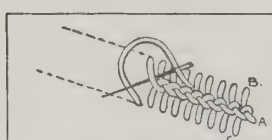
## Appendix: Stitch Diagrams



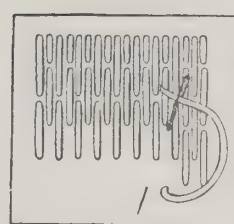
Arrowhead Stitch



Back Stitch



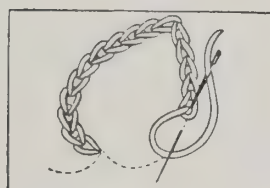
Basque Knot Stitch



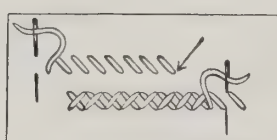
Brick Stitch



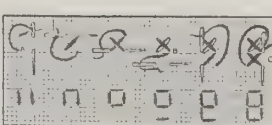
Buttonhole Stitch



Chain Stitch



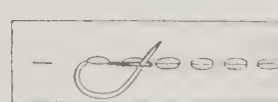
Cross Stitch



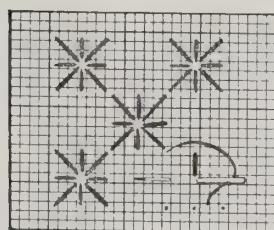
Cross Stitch, Marking



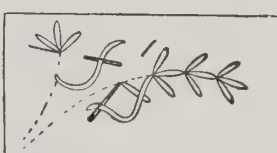
Darning Stitch



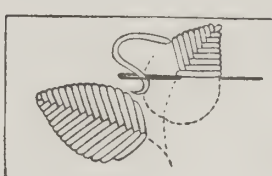
Dot Stitch



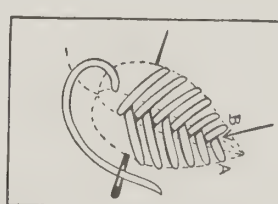
Eye Stitch



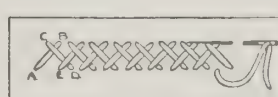
Fern Stitch



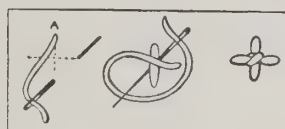
Fishbone Stitch



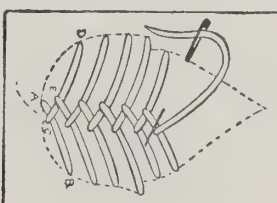
Fishbone Stitch, Open



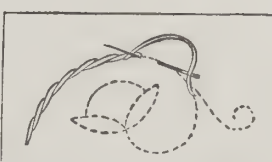
Herringbone Stitch



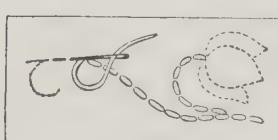
Knot Double Stitch



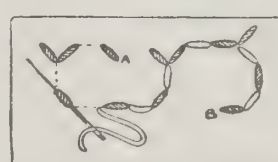
Leaf Double Stitch



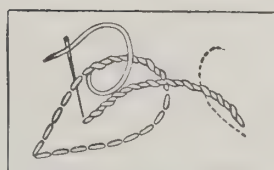
Outline Stitch



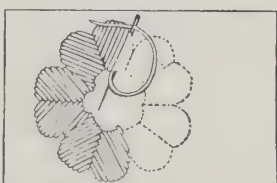
Running Stitch



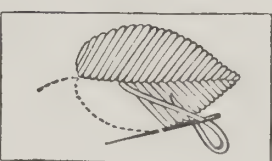
Running Stitch, Double



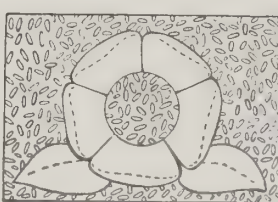
Running Stitch, Whipped



Satin Stitch



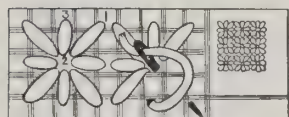
Satin Stitch, Surface



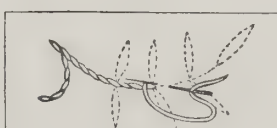
Seed Stitch



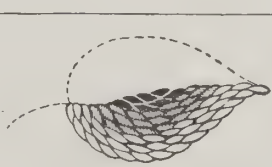
Split Stitch



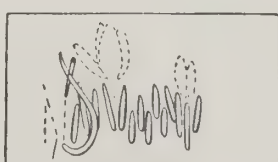
Star Stitch



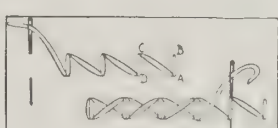
Stem Stitch



Stem Stitch, Shading



Straight Stitch



Zig Zag Stitch







THE STELLA KRAMRISCH COLLECTION





## Interwoven in the Pattern of Time: Stella Kramrisch and Kanthas

DARIELLE MASON

Time will not prolong the lives of men; it will not defer their death. It will bring them back again into a new youth and a life resonant with their past. In time their life will be ready for death—and rebirth. . . . Death and rebirth thenceforth came to be interwoven in the pattern of time . . . . The paradox of the motionless ascetic withdrawn from the world yet moved by pity for its creatures is resolved by a form of time that carries quiescence in its structure.

—Stella Kramrisch,  
*The Presence of Śiva*, p. 127

As her monumental 1981 book *The Presence of Śiva* reflects, Stella Kramrisch was a consummate myth-maker (fig. 7.1).<sup>1</sup> Nor did she spare her life this tendency, although here her mythic imagination may have provided privacy as well as narrative richness. Yet the simple facts of her biography and writings are themselves the stuff of legend. Indeed, her life is much like her vision of kanthas: a woman's private devotion, a painstaking synthesis of fragments, a resonant re-creation of timeless meaning.

Kramrisch was born in 1896 in the town of Nikolsburg, Moravia (now Mikulov, Czech Republic), the only child of an intellectual and affluent Jewish family.<sup>2</sup> Although her father instilled in her a love of nature and her mother one of art, they also kept her isolated from other children and she looked to pets and her own vivid imagination for company (fig. 7.2). When she was ten years old, the family moved to fin-de-siècle Vienna where she studied classical ballet (dance becoming a lifelong passion) and received an intensive classical education. Her discovery of Indian temple sculpture fragments in a local museum and a translation of the *Bhagavadgita* in a local library sparked a fascination with Indian art and religion that she followed into the large literature of Germanic Indology. At sixteen she entered the University of

Vienna and encountered the newly emerging field of art history, then being defined across the German-speaking world. In the seminars of Josef Strzygowski, she pursued her interest in India and focused her thesis on early Buddhist monuments.<sup>3</sup>

Strzygowski is often dismissed for his racial theories, which emerged most fully in his later years, but he was also one of the earliest Islamic art historians and helped lay the groundwork for that field. He combined serious extended fieldwork and linguistic proficiency with, as Robert Hillenbrand writes, "delight in generalizing, in making unexpected connections, in assessing a problem synoptically," while also "conjuring up theories at the drop of a hat and making leaps of faith across vast chasms of missing evidence."<sup>4</sup> With a foundation in formalism, Strzygowski looked for continuity of motifs throughout history, searching for origins and also seeking to define national or ethnic genius, methodologies shared by many of his contemporaries and retained by Kramrisch throughout her life. During his twenty-four years heading the Institute of Art History, Strzygowski supervised as many as seventy Ph.D. students,<sup>5</sup> almost a factory output, but one that also provided Kramrisch with an extraordinarily stimulating community.

Although her university years encompassed the misery of the First World War and its aftermath, Kramrisch clearly made the most of her situation. She engaged with modern art in Vienna in a number of ways—seeing exhibitions and attending lectures during the heyday of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, as well as reading on the subject. Indeed, contemporary art remained an underlying fascination with her to the end of her life. In her final years she traveled regularly from Philadelphia to New York to attend openings of favored artists such as Anselm Kiefer and, at the age of ninety-three, contributed an essay—





her last published writing—to the catalogue for a retrospective of Francesco Clemente.<sup>6</sup>

Kramrisch's participation in Vienna's avant-garde arts community went beyond that of spectator. During her university years, she continued to dance and also began to give solo public performances. Although she did not describe these performances in detail, they were undoubtedly what was termed *Ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance), a then popular form of modern dance in which a single dancer choreographed and performed his or her own emotive interpretations of music and theme. Kramrisch's contemporary, Viennese dancer Gertrud Bodenwieser (who herself first performed publicly in 1919), became perhaps the best-known proponent of *Ausdruckstanz* and made it synonymous with the city. Bodenwieser's style at this time has been described as using "sculptural forms and tableaux vivants to express visionary content," an approach that certainly would have appealed to Kramrisch.<sup>7</sup>

Given her focus on India it is not surprising that she connected with the Theosophists—early on with Rudolf Steiner in Vienna and later with Annie Besant in India. As all of Kramrisch's work and good portions of her biography attest, the spiritual was a key element in what attracted her to South Asia and its

arts, although her passion for the tactile and beautiful meant that it was never the sole attraction. Spiritual resonance, symbolism, and the lineage of symbols always intrigued her, as is evident in her work on *kanthas*. While she touched on the artistic traditions of nearly all South Asia's religions during her long career, aspects of Hinduism most fascinated her, especially the Shaiva path where her scholarship and personal devotion eventually overlapped.

In 1919, with starvation rampant in Austria, Oxford University offered short-term lecturing scholarships to faculty of the University of Vienna whose studies connected to "British interests." Although she was just then completing her thesis, Strzygowski helped her take part in this program. The first of her three public lectures at Oxford was on Hindu temples, although she had encountered them only in photographs and fragments. There she met Sir William Rothstein, director of the Royal Academy and a friend of Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. Just how Kramrisch met Tagore himself is unclear—he may have attended this lecture, as she sometimes reported, but it is more likely that she met him later at Rothstein's house.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the circumstance, Tagore offered her a teaching post at the recently founded *Visva-Bharati*, his experimental university at Santiniketan in rural Bengal. That very year he had also hired the artist Nandalal Bose to establish *Kala Bhavan*, its institute for the visual arts. In late 1921, as soon as Kramrisch was able to obtain a visa, she was on a boat to Calcutta.<sup>9</sup> She traveled the hundred miles (160 kilometers) northwest to Santiniketan and immediately took up a teaching post at *Kala Bhavan*, even living for a time in Bose's family home as she established herself at the university.<sup>10</sup>

The very day after her arrival at Santiniketan, as we know from an anecdote she told to Barbara Stoler

Fig. 7.1. Stella Kramrisch in India, 1930s. Kramrisch Biographical Research, Indian Art Department Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives

Fig. 7.2. Kramrisch as a child with her dog Flockie, taken about 1900. Kramrisch Biographical Research, Indian Art Department Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives





Miller, two of Stella's lifelong passions came to the fore—collecting and the vernacular arts of India (as well as her interest in modern art). “It was the day of the Santiniketan melā, the founding day, so there was a beautiful fair where the villagers came and displayed their handmade goods. I fell in love, first of all, with a toy wooden cart, a *ratha*, and also with one painting . . . by one of the pupils of Nandalal Bose.” She asked Bose to intervene to reduce the price of the painting so she could buy it, using her “last seven rupees.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout her life Kramrisch continued to collect avidly. Well over a thousand objects from her personal collection are now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, many donated during her tenure as curator with the majority left as part of her splendid bequest. Although she did not document the circumstances of her art acquisitions, it is likely that much of her Bengali vernacular material was acquired at such fairs and through informal contact during her years in Calcutta, as it was hardly the stuff of art dealers until quite recently.

During her brief time at Kala Bhavan, both faculty and students attended lectures in which she not only spoke on Indian art but also on the history of art in the West and, most memorably, on the recent history and current state of modern art in Europe and the United States. As one former student, the artist and, eventually, Kala Bhavan faculty member Binodebehari Mukherjee, wrote: “Most of us know Kramrisch as an art-historian, but her role in the modern Indian art vision has never been conceded. . . . It was Kramrisch who opened a new vista for Indian artists by explaining to them from the point of modernism, experiments made in various media and form in Indian art.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a number of her smaller publications from these years deal with modern art, both in India and the West.<sup>13</sup> She continued to focus on earlier traditions in most of her writings, however, although her interests quickly expanded from her base in Buddhist art.

While Kramrisch remained within Tagore's circle, her tenure at his university was short lived as she was hired in 1923 by the University of Calcutta, the first university established by the British in India and a leading research facility (as well as the first university in the British Empire to award a degree to a woman). Kramrisch was not only the first person

trained in the new European discipline of art history to teach in India, but also the first member of the Calcutta faculty to be hired to teach the art of the subcontinent—as well as the first European and the first female faculty member. Her students there spanned several generations and included such leading academics as J. N. Banerjea, Niharranjan Ray, and S. K. Sarasawati, as well as some of the foremost art collectors and dealers of the twentieth century, including Nasli Heeramanek and Chhote Bharany.

As an unmarried woman she strove to maintain an independent dignity, yet she was very much in the thick of Calcutta's extraordinary intellectual elite. In the 1920s this was still, arguably, a community whose vitality rivaled that of the pre-war Vienna of her youth. During this time she continued her own Sanskrit tutelage and accessed a variety of early religious texts (Vedic and other) that infused her thinking for the rest of her career. She carried meanings from these earlier texts into her understanding of later art, whether temples or kanthas, with an enthusiasm less acceptable in today's carefully historicized practice, yet which endowed her writings with an unmatched depth and grandeur.

Kramrisch began forming her collection of kanthas during her early years in India and at the same time began working with others in the region—including Gurusaday Dutt<sup>14</sup>—to place the “folk arts” on a level with the “fine arts.” According to Miller, Kramrisch had discussed the idea of collecting folk arts, including kanthas, with Sir Asutosh Mukherjee before his death in 1924. Mukherjee was at that time vice-chancellor of the University of Calcutta. It was he who had hired Kramrisch and instituted the study not only of Indian art but also of history and archaeology. At that time he had also conceived the idea of a university museum, which was named for him at its establishment in 1937.<sup>15</sup> The first curator of the Asutosh Museum was one of Kramrisch's former students, Devaprasad (D.P.) Ghosh. As Miller writes, “In consultation with her, Ghose [*sic*] organized students from the villages in the environs of Calcutta to collect examples of folk art. The effort succeeded in preserving a representative collection of Bengali village art following the plan Sir Asutosh had discussed with Stella before his death.”<sup>16</sup> The close relationships between a number of the kanthas in the Asu-



tosh collection and those in the Kramrisch Collection suggest that some of her personal collection also was acquired through this effort.

The idea of cultural continuity, of the essentially unbroken path of ideas from antiquity to the present, especially in India, is deeply embedded in all of Kramrisch's writings. In her landmark 1939 article "Kanthā," she states: "Time has nothing to do with the symbolism of kanthās nor with their making. The symbols stored in the kanthās belong to the primeval images in which man beholds the universe. Their meaning is present in their shape and the position and relation which these shapes have within the whole; symbol and composition are inseparable in kanthās."<sup>17</sup> She substantiates this statement through references to Vedic concepts and an emphasis on "perpetual" motifs. For example, she uses Pali terms taken from early Buddhist texts along with motifs found in early coins and the Buddhist sculptures from Bharhut (c. second century B.C.) and Sanchi (first century B.C. to first century A.D.; fig. 7.3), the foci of her thesis, to interpret the unusual motifs at the center and corners of one kantha in her collection (fig. 7.4). The visual similarities between these motifs and those on the kantha are indeed compelling, although the concrete historical links remain tenuous. However, Kramrisch implies not so much a direct transmission across two millennia as a specific symbolic code common to all ages and strata of the Indic world.

This vision is most fully articulated in a second 1939 article, "Indian Terracottas: Ageless Types and Timed Variations," published in the same issue of the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* (of which she was then the co-editor with Abanindranath Tagore).<sup>18</sup> In "Indian Terracottas," Kramrisch carries this timeless continuity from ideas and motifs to complete objects and even classes of objects. She attempts to encompass the art form through all of Indian history, from the third millennium B.C. or earlier up to the present. Yet while she makes comparisons to contemporary practice, all the examples illustrated are ancient. In dealing simultaneously with ancient and recent production in the text, however, she creates a universal typology for the medium, as her subtitle summarizes, and it is such typology that underlies her thinking on vernacular arts throughout her career. She finds older sculptures

that bear a formal resemblance to modern products, regularly the simplest works in technique and type, and labels these as "timeless," using as synonyms both "ageless" and "primitive." She thus implies that these types of objects constitute an unbroken, common tradition that is in some way intrinsically, fundamentally of a different nature from "timed" or "historical" works, that is, those she believes can be formally linked only to specific historical eras.

Kramrisch invariably privileged the meaning of objects as representations of the unseen. By demonstrating the antiquity and continuity of meaning, she, like her older contemporary Ananda Coomaraswamy,<sup>19</sup> validated the art of the subcontinent to a Western world determined, for its own ends, to exclude that production from the potent designation of "fine art." This approach also validated the so-called craft traditions, including textiles and terra-cottas, by showing them as sharing in the symbolic vocabulary and profundity of works traditionally included under the fine arts umbrella. While her interpretation links to a certain extent with the concept of race genius common to Strzygowski and his generation, it also partakes of the move to discover a universal common-ground of myth and religious symbolism (as in the later writings of Coomaraswamy and best known from the works of Mircea Eliade).

Kramrisch wrote profusely during her years in Calcutta, and especially during holidays when sequestered in a bungalow in the Himalayan foothills.<sup>20</sup> She published not only her own work but also translations from German and French of articles by leading European Orientalist scholars, including Strzygowski, to make them accessible to the Indian scholarly community. Her own wide-ranging publications include her remarkably synthetic 1933 study *Indian Sculpture*, which perhaps best demonstrates her ability to see and articulate form. During this period she also began her exploration of the textual evidence for the processes and organization of artistic creation, first through her translation of parts of the *Visnudharmottarapurana*,<sup>21</sup> a text discussing, among other things, the methods of painting and image making. This formed the basis for several articles written in the 1950s drawing on Sanskrit texts and inscriptions that talked about the nature and organization of the profes-





Fig. 7.3. Detail of *vardhamana* motif topping a gateway of Stupa 1, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh. Photograph by the author



Fig. 7.4. Detail of plate 24

sional artist/craftsman,<sup>22</sup> especially, as she writes, the architect/carver prior to “the last centuries, under Muslim and British rule” when the “Great Tradition of architectural sculpture died a slow death.”<sup>23</sup>

Along with her many publications on painting and vernacular art, she also produced a series of articles hinting at the extensive fieldwork and long-term thought that would result in one of her major—arguably her greatest—contributions to world scholarship, the two-volume 1946 publication *The Hindu Temple*.<sup>24</sup> In this work she attempts to decode the meaning of the structure and motifs of one of the world’s most complex traditions of symbolic architecture, that of the north Indic (Nagara) Temple. Although she deals with motifs individually, she explores the meaning of each as intimately and inextricably linked to its architectural location within the whole. This and her perception of the whole as explicitly manifesting the notion of an infinite expansion from the center, mimicking cosmic form, may be said to be among the most creative and powerful parts of her monumental contribution. As in her other writings, she utilizes texts to substantiate her points without regard to their age and regional origin relative to monuments, so long as they originate in what she perceives as the Indic tradition.

In 1929 Kramrisch married the Hungarian economist Laszlo Nemenyi, but her marriage in no way slowed her scholarship, and for a good portion of it

he was posted in Delhi while she remained in Calcutta.<sup>25</sup> Following Independence and Partition in 1947, however, Nemenyi was posted to Pakistan, which made the situation difficult for Kramrisch. It was made even more so, undoubtedly politically as well as emotionally, by Nemenyi’s death in 1950.<sup>26</sup> Her only publication that year was her second article on *kanthas*—“*Kanthas of Bengal*,” in the Bombay-based journal *Marg*, an abbreviated version of her earlier work with minimized discussion of the symbolic lineage.<sup>27</sup>

It was at this time that Kramrisch left India, to return only for research trips. At the invitation of eminent Sanskritist William Norman Brown, she joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia as part of the newly formed Department of South Asian Regional Studies. Brown had founded this interdisciplinary program in 1948, and it was the first area studies program in the United States to focus on the region. Brown had long been associated with the Philadelphia Museum of Art where he had acted as adjunct curator during the installation of the Museum’s Asian wing, including researching and designing the installation for its sixteenth-century South Indian temple hall.<sup>28</sup> He suggested that the Museum hire Kramrisch, and in 1954 she became its first Curator for Indian Art, a post she retained (later as Curator Emeritus) until her death.

At the same time she requested that the collection of stone temple sculpture she had gathered, primarily during her early fieldwork for *The Hindu Temple*, be sent to the Philadelphia Museum of Art from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where it had been on loan since 1931.<sup>29</sup> Much of that collection was purchased for the Museum by a group of donors, and Kramrisch installed the Museum’s first coherent galleries of South Asian art adjacent to the Temple Hall.<sup>30</sup>

The year 1954 also saw the publication of her survey *The Art of India: Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture*,<sup>31</sup> in which she condensed all the diverse work of her years in India. She also began regularly publishing new acquisitions in the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s *Bulletin*, showing the ways in which she cultivated and grew the collection despite the paucity of funds. In 1960 she came out with what was primarily a catalogue of her own col-



lection, *Indian Sculpture in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*. Simultaneously she continued her exploration of ancient religious texts, particularly Vedic, and these writings<sup>32</sup> colored her later projects, including her work on “folk” art—what she came to call “the art of tribe and village.”

In 1960 she opened a gallery of Himalayan art at the Museum. Dedicated by the King of Nepal and funded by her friend, mythologue-designer-performer Natacha Rambova,<sup>33</sup> it was the first permanent gallery in a U.S. museum to focus on this material. The following year she organized the exhibition *The Art of Nepal* for the Asia Society Galleries in New York, which was then developing an active loan exhibition program.<sup>34</sup>

Groundbreaking and influential as the Nepal show was, it paled in scope and volume to the first temporary exhibition she produced for Philadelphia, the 1968 blockbuster *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*. Nearly five hundred objects filled the Museum’s extensive special exhibition galleries, which were painted in modernist white and interspersed with photographic murals of the works in their original ritual contexts (fig. 7.5). Indeed, although she arranged the objects in a vaguely regional organization and made distinctions among tribal, village, popular, and gendered work, the overarching theme was ritual. Katherine Hacker, in her article “Displaying a Tribal Imaginary: Known and *Unknown India*,” succinctly critiques the exhibition while placing it in the historiographic context of the study and exhibition of such material, both from India and globally. She writes that “Kramrisch’s show functioned simultaneously within domains of inclusion and exclusion: inserted into the canon of aesthetic objects but contained as so-called traditional or ritual arts, fixing indigenous cultures in ‘traditional’ mode.”<sup>35</sup>

*Unknown India* was a monumental undertaking, and following Philadelphia it traveled to San Francisco and St. Louis (fig. 7.6). The show and its accompanying catalogue were created by Kramrisch in collaboration with Haku Shah, an Ahmedabad-based artist and noted specialist on the folk arts of western India.<sup>36</sup> Nearly 40 percent of the objects came from Kramrisch’s personal collection, while another third were loans from India.

Eastern India, by far the most extensive regional section in the exhibition, included thirty-two kanthas, undoubtedly the largest number of historical kanthas ever exhibited in the United States until the present show. Although we do not have direct evidence on which pieces now in the Museum were acquired during her years in Calcutta, we can infer much from *Unknown India* in conjunction with her earlier publications. She included twenty-eight kanthas from her personal collection, publishing them as “anonymous” loans.<sup>37</sup> Many of these pieces had also been used as illustrations for her earlier kantha articles.

Undoubtedly in honor of *Unknown India*, in 1968 she donated eighteen kanthas to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, all of which had been included in the exhibition. The eleven other pieces from her collection published and exhibited in 1968 remained in her personal collection until they came to the Museum as part of her bequest, together with four other pieces illustrated in her articles but not included in the exhibition.

The nineteen pieces that complete her bequest and collection are not accounted for in her publications. Some, such as two tiny nonfigural squares (see plates 12, 13), she may not have considered of enough significance or relevance to publish or exhibit. Others, while of interest, may well have been overshadowed during the selection process by similar and superior pieces and thus might have formed part of the collection she brought from India. However, it is truly surprising that, had she owned them at the time, she would not have included the deliciously delicate and iconographically loaded kantha that is arguably her finest piece (see plate 1), or another with a fascinating multitiered temple structure (see plate 31). It is well known that Kramrisch continued to collect actively throughout her life, both on her frequent research trips to India where folk arts such as kanthas were readily available and legally exported, and through dealers in the West. In addition, as evidenced by one kantha on which the donor has embroidered dedications to her, some of the quilts were personal gifts (fig. 7.7; see also plate 16).

Also throughout her life, in her various residences from Calcutta to Philadelphia, Kramrisch surrounded





Fig. 7.5. A view of the Eastern India section of *Unknown India* as installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. *Unknown India*, Exhibition Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives



Fig. 7.6. A view of the same section as in fig. 7.5, as installed at the City Art Museum of Saint Louis, where the exhibition traveled in the summer of 1968. *Unknown India*, Exhibition Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives

herself with her collection, including kanthas. Photographer Dorothy Norman vividly described a visit to Kramrisch's house in Calcutta in 1950, the very year she left for Philadelphia:

The junglelike landscape that we traverse is tropical, brooding, mysterious, but suddenly a two-story house with orchids clustered around it is revealed. Dr. Kramrisch—small, European, shy—appears on the second floor. In spite of oppressive heat, the stone structure is delightfully cool. She leads me through one of the most beautiful rooms I have seen in India. Small Hindu sculptures are perfectly displayed. The cloth on the table is simple, yet elegantly embroidered by village craftsmen. The furniture, Sheraton in style, was made in India in Sheraton's own time, she tells me. Dr. Kramrisch, I note with pleasure, is wearing a gown made of Indian material; it reflects her sensitivity to lovely peasant fabrics largely ignored by the "sophisticated" Indian. The apartment's originality and beauty are dazzling.<sup>38</sup>

Not long after she settled in Philadelphia, Kramrisch bought and renovated an eighteenth-century schoolhouse in Phoenixville, some twenty-five miles from the city, and furnished it much as she had her last home in Calcutta. She integrated kanthas (fig. 7.8) and other "folk" arts with major stone sculptures, Himalayan *thangkas* and metal images, Rajput "miniatures," and her dark colonial furniture. Some of the kanthas certainly faded from light exposure and use, but most survived, miraculously intact despite the constant presence of her many beloved felines (fig. 7.9).

I visited only her final home, a gracious penthouse on Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square. As I recall, the only textiles used as furnishings were her exquisite carpets, but she kept the kanthas close at hand, stored in a dark wooden bureau in her living room together with appliquéd, embroidered, and brocaded pieces from other parts of India. On my visits as an awestruck graduate student, I vividly recall her showing me individual pieces or whole stacks pulled from the carefully organized drawers, as the conversation determined.

Following *Unknown India*, Kramrisch continued to curate, collect, and write until her final years. She produced publications and organized museum exhibitions that were culminations of her life's work in the study of religious art—in particular her 1981 double act, the intensely personal exploration *The Presence of Śiva* and the museologically groundbreaking exhibition *Manifestations of Shiva*, which intermingled "folk" and "high" arts to explore its subject.<sup>39</sup> Her few other writings that focused explicitly on the vernacular arts were primarily in the form of reviews of the works of other scholars. Her 1985 essay "The Ritual Arts of India" for the Smithsonian Institution's exhibition *Aditi: The Living Arts of India*<sup>40</sup> was a pointedly titled reprint of text from *Unknown India*, providing her final statement on the matter.

Throughout most of her more than forty years in Philadelphia, Kramrisch was not only on the Museum's staff but also a full-time faculty member at two institutions. Although she had retired from the University



of Pennsylvania in 1964, she went on to teach and advise graduate students at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts well into the 1980s.

For the massive Festival of India held across the United States in 1986, Kramrisch was persuaded by Museum Director Anne d'Harnoncourt to produce one last exhibition. For *Painted Delight: Indian Paintings from Philadelphia Collections*,<sup>41</sup> she drew together a hidden wealth of masterworks from local institutions and collectors, many of whom she had inspired over the years. (She also greatly enhanced the selection by anonymously lending works from her own collection.) As had been her norm, Kramrisch oversaw each detail, from supervising the painters as they mixed wall colors to specifying the mat-shape she considered optimal for each piece. The exhibition opened the year she turned ninety (fig. 7.10). As she had in *Manifestations of Shiva*, she integrated the most luxuriant of courtly works with village pieces, placing on the same walls paintings by elite and non-elite artists. The process of legitimizing folk art that had budded in her early writings, ripened with the staging of *Unknown India* in a fine arts museum, here came to maturity.

In her final decades, she received numerous honors, including the prestigious Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest civil awards (fig. 7.11). Kramrisch's bequest to the Philadelphia Museum of Art included more than 700 objects, the balance of her collection, touching on nearly all realms of South Asian art. Soon many of her masterpieces enriched the Museum's South Asian sculpture galleries to stand side by side with other works she had collected that



entered the Museum nearly three-quarters of a century earlier. Pieces from her collection have formed the core of more than twenty thematic exhibitions exploring a range of topics. Exhibitions as diverse as *Threads of Cotton, Threads of Brass: Arts of Eastern India and Bangladesh from the Stella Kramrisch Collection* (1998–99), *India's Middle Ground: Art of the Deccan* (2003–4), *Himalayan Texts and Charms* (2004–5), and *Multiple Modernities: India, 1905–2005* (2008) have included objects made by and for people from all strata of society, for a multidimensional perspective seldom possible within a single museum, and impossible without Kramrisch's legacy, both intellectual and physical.

Indeed, her exceptional bequest went beyond her private collection. She also created an endowment to provide for the many needs of the South Asian and Himalayan collections as a whole, including conservation, display, study, and augmentation. This bequest certainly represented her love of her adopted city

Fig. 7.7. Detail of plate 16 showing one of two dedications to Kramrisch embroidered onto a kantha in her collection

Fig. 7.8. A bedroom in Kramrisch's renovated schoolhouse home in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, showing a kantha (plate 25) used as a bedspread. Nearby is one of her masterpieces of stone sculpture, the fifth-century image of Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, made under the Gupta rulers of northern India (1994-148-1), as well as other pieces from her collection. Kramrisch Biographical Research, Indian Art Department Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives



Fig. 7.9. Kramrisch at home with one of her cats in the 1960s. Kramrisch Biographical Research, Indian Art Department Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives



Fig. 7.10. Kramrisch and Sir Edmund Hillary at the opening of *Painted Delight* in 1986  
Exhibition Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives



Fig. 7.11. Philadelphia Museum of Art Director Anne d'Harnoncourt admires Kramrisch's Padma Bhushan medal after it was awarded by Indian Consul General P. P. Souza on September 15, 1982. Kramrisch Biographical Research, Indian Art Department Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives

and of the institution where she had spent more than half her working life. But even more, it demonstrated her certainty that these objects—whether of cloth, clay, stone, paper, or metal; from village or tribe, court or temple—would have meaning for future generations. And although she believed their meaning to be timeless, she knew that they required and deserved ever new interpretation and presentation to communicate their richness to each successive generation. In this way, each, like her collection of *kanthas*, would be “brought back to a new youth with a life resonant with their past.”

## NOTES

1. Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 127. Although I did not study under Dr. Kramrisch at the University of Pennsylvania, I did have the good fortune to know her while a graduate student there, and to assist with her final exhibition catalogue. However, it was very late in her life and my primary recollection is of awe at her persona and her legend. Much of my information on her has come from her many longtime friends and colleagues who have shared their memories (their “Stella stories”) with me over the years. The most extensive and thoughtful piece of biographical writing published on Kramrisch remains the essay by noted Sanskritist Barbara Stoler Miller (1940–1993), “Stella Kramrisch: A Biographical Essay,” in *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 3–34. Miller, who had done her thesis under Kramrisch and W. Norman Brown at the University of Pennsylvania, was also a close friend and received this life story in a lengthy 1979 recorded interview. Following their deaths (Miller's only a few months before Kramrisch's), Nancy Baxter, who had been Kramrisch's departmental assistant at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, transcribed the full interview and went on to meet and correspond with many of Kramrisch's relatives and friends to verify dates and details. I have drawn freely from this transcript and correspondence (most now in the Archives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art), as well as from Baxter's notes, and am grateful to her for this timely work. I have also drawn from other correspondence and records relating to Kramrisch (the majority official communiqués) housed in the Museum's archive, Registrar's files, and in the Department of Indian and Himalayan Art. For a concise though nuanced posthumous biography, see Michael W. Meister, “Kramrisch, Stella,” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2d ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). We thank the Kramrisch family in Great Britain for providing photographs of young Stella to the Museum's archive.

2. While occasionally mentioning that her father, Isadore Kramrisch (1868–1923), was Jewish, she was less clear about mother, Berta Kramrisch (1872–1942). For example, she told Miller that her mother had been born Catholic and that the whole family often attended mass. She told her longtime friend Gerta Calmann, whom she had first met in Calcutta in 1932, that her mother had been Roma (Gypsy). However, the Kramrisch family today gives her maiden name as Pollak. A large number of Pollaks are buried in the Jewish cemetery at Nikolsburg (indeed, the Nikolsburg of Kramrisch's youth was the major Jewish population center in Moravia). Berta Kramrisch's name appears among the inhabitants of the Lodz Ghetto in the 1940–42 population list, as does a death date of January 29, 1942, implying that she was brought there in the fall of 1941 but did not survive the first harsh winter. See the data-



base at [www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/lodzghetto.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/lodzghetto.html), compiled from the five-volume *Lodz-Names: List of Ghetto Inhabitants, 1940-1944* (Jerusalem: Organization of Former Residents of Lodz in Israel and Yad Vashem, 1994), itself a compilation of the handwritten population registry books kept by the ghetto's Jewish administration.

3. Stella Kramrisch, *Untersuchungen zum Wesen der frühbuddhistischen Bildnerei Indiens* (Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, 1919). In particular she had seen photographs of the Buddhist stupas from Sanchi and Bharhut given to Strzygowski by his friend Victor Goloubew, the important collector of Persian and Mughal painting. However, Kramrisch told Miller that, while "visually impressed" especially by Bharhut, she was "never inclined very much toward Buddhism."

4. Robert Hillenbrand, "Creswell and Contemporary Central European Scholarship," *Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture* 8 (1991), pp. 23-35; quotations on pp. 31 and 28.

5. Ibid, p. 33 n. 62, quoting Ernst Diez, one of Strzygowski's Ph.D. students. Compare Katherine Hacker's discussion of Gurusaday Dutt's ideas in "In Search of 'Living Traditions,'" this volume.

6. Stella Kramrisch, "Twenty-four Indian Miniatures," in *Francesco Clemente: Three Worlds*, ed. Ann Percy and Raymond Foye (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1990), pp. 88-97. Helen Williams Drutt English, one of her closest friends in her final decades, recalls accompanying Kramrisch on frequent trips to New York to attend openings by contemporary artists, especially Kiefer, and Kramrisch's intense involvement with the 1987 exhibition of Kiefer's work at the Museum.

7. Marina Sassenberg, "Gertrud Bodenweiser, 1890-1959," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula Hymen and Dalia Ofer (Jerusalem: Shalvi Publishing, 2006 online edition). See also Bettina Vernon-Warren and Charles Warren, eds., *Gertrud Bodenweiser and Vienna's Contribution to Ausdruckstanz* (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999). However, Vienna had long before embraced the emerging discipline of modern dance, even prior to Isadora Duncan's first performance there in 1902.

8. Kramrisch herself gave the first account on many occasions (although not on others). To Miller she said that, on coming into the audience after the lecture, "I felt something around me and something above me and these were the long-sleeved arms of Rabindranath and his long beard and he told me I must come to Santiniketan." However, Calmann wrote that Stella "had been originally invited to Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore, whom she met in London in the house of the director of the Tate Gallery, Mr. Rothstein. . . . She told me of this meeting: she was overwhelmed by the impression Tagore's personality made on her and expressed her admiration of him by dancing" (letter to Nancy Baxter, August 15, 1994, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives). This agrees with Rothstein's own words (see note 9 below). A completely different story was told by Kramrisch's cousin, Robert Nuki.

According to Nuki's account, Kramrisch was on a visit to his mother in London when she met Tagore by chance in a gallery of the British Museum while she was sketching Indian motifs to sell to wallpaper manufacturers (Baxter's notes based on a 1994 letter to her from Nuki).

9. In a letter dated April 23, 1921, Rothstein cautions Tagore on "the danger of people whom you don't want streaming in" to Santiniketan, and advises on how to weed out "spiritual dabblers" and "other riffraff" from the "true scholars." He immediately segues into news about Kramrisch: "The young Austrian-Slovakian lady came to see me yesterday to ask if I could help her get a passport for India. But . . . it is most unlikely to issue passports to any foreigners . . . [until] things have settled down in India. . . . In this particular case I believe you owe me a cock. For I have saved you from the results of an invitation which the recipient, had she been quite worthy of it, would not have [been] quite so ready to accept. One wants more than a single meeting, on either side, in such important affairs. Perhaps I am unduly suspicious of the softer sex. But when great things have to be carried through, I doubt whether it is wise to encumber yourself with almond eyed ladies, however devoted to stupas and Boddhisaras [sic]." Mary M. Lago, ed., *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), Letter 143, p. 281.

10. Personal communication with Supratik Bose, grandson of Nandalal Bose, 2008.

11. Miller, "Stella Kramrisch," p. 10.

12. Quoted on Visva-Bharati's website, <http://www.visva-bharati.ac.in/GreatMasters/Contents/stella.htm>.

13. See, e.g., Stella Kramrisch, "An Indian Cubist," *Rupam* 2 (July 1922), pp. 107-9; Stella Kramrisch, "The Present Moment of Art East and West," *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (October 1923), pp. 221-25.

14. See Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions.'"

15. There appears to be some confusion on this date. The university's own website and other sources give the date of 1937 for its founding. However, Miller, "Stella Kramrisch," p. 12, gives the date as 1932, quoting from *Great Art Centres of Calcutta*, ed. Heinz Molle (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1973); Miller also calls D. P. Ghosh the director of the museum while the university and his own publications list him as curator.

16. Miller, "Stella Kramrisch," p. 12.

17. Stella Kramrisch, "Kanthā," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 (1939), p. 158 (reprinted in this volume).

18. Stella Kramrisch, "Indian Terracottas: Ageless Types and Timed Variations," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 (1939), pp. 89-110.

19. While Coomaraswamy did not follow the timeless/timed dichotomy in his more archaeological (or geological) approach to objects, his approach to ideas—what he termed "the perennial philosophy"—more than compensated.



20. At least between 1934 and 1936 this was in Takdah, Darjeeling, where Kramrisch either rented or owned a small house that had been part of a former British barracks (correspondence to and from Calmann and from Suzanne Levy, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives). Later, she may have moved even higher into the mountains (personal communication from Kramrisch to Michael Meister). Between 1937 and 1941, Kramrisch also spent part of each summer in England lecturing at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.
21. Stella Kramrisch, "The Vishnudharmottaram: A Treatise on Indian Painting," *Calcutta Review*, 3d ser. 10, no. 2 (February 1924), pp. 331-86; see also her expanded version, *The Vishnudharmottaram (Pt. III): A Treatise on Indian Painting and Image Making* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1928).
22. Stella Kramrisch, "Artist, Patron and Public in India," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (May 1956), pp. 29-35; Stella Kramrisch, "Traditions of the Indian Craftsman," *Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (July-September 1958), pp. 224-30. Both are reprinted by Miller in *Exploring India's Sacred Art*.
23. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 49. The exhibition was held January 20 to February 26, 1968, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; March 28 to June 9, 1968, at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco; and July 15 to August 20, 1968, at the City Art Museum of St. Louis.
24. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1946).
25. While her letters display great fondness for him, she told Miller that they had each "agreed to go on with our own work."
26. He was found dead on a Karachi beach following a dinner party. The case was never publicly resolved.
27. Stella Kramrisch, "Kanthas of Bengal," *Marg* 3, no. 2 (1950), pp. 18-29, 37.
28. W. Norman Brown, *A Pillared Hall from a Temple in Madura, India, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; London: H. Milford; Oxford University Press, 1940).
29. In a 1946 letter to Calmann, she wrote: "I have been able to collect a few lovable sculptures and some paintings and think of getting back here my sculptures in the V. and A. Museum and also things I lent to the Indian Institute, Oxford [the latter was assimilated into the Ashmolean Museum in 1961], so that I can again live 'in good company'" (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archive). She did not, however, retrieve the works from Britain until after her move to Philadelphia.
30. For this first installation she organized the works by religious affiliation (one room for Hindu art, a second for Buddhist); when she reinstalled the collection in the early 1970s she chose instead to organize them chronologically and by broad regions.
31. Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India: Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture* (New York: Phaidon, 1954).
32. Stella Kramrisch, "The Rg Vedic Myth of the Craftsmen (The R̥bhus)," *Artibus Asiae* 22, nos. 1-2 (1959), pp. 113-20.
33. Born Winifred Kimball Shaughnessy, Rambova is perhaps best known as the wife of Rudolph Valentino, but she was a major intellectual and artistic force in her own right. She shared a funder/publisher with Kramrisch (the Bollingen Foundation), and Kramrisch often attended symposia on mythology and spiritualism hosted by Rambova in her New York apartment. Rambova bequeathed her collection of Nepalese and Tibetan religious arts to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and had a gallery named after her there. See Michael Morris, *Madame Valentino: The Many Lives of Natacha Rambova* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991). See also Dorothy Norman's wonderful description of her experiences with Rambova in *Encounters: A Memoir* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), especially pp. 207-13.
34. Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of Nepal* (New York: Asia Society, 1964).
35. Katherine Hacker, "Displaying a Tribal Imaginary: Known and Unknown India," *Museum Anthropology* 23, no. 3 (2000), pp. 5-25.
36. See Michael W. Meister, "Hakubhai and Stella Kramrisch," in *Invisible Order: Tribute to Haku Shah*, ed. Eberhard Fischer (New Delhi: Art Indus, 1999), pp. 81-83.
37. Of the remaining four kanthas in the show, one was borrowed from the Gurusaday Museum / Bhadracharya Society and the other three from the Asutosh Museum, the collection she had been instrumental in forming. In addition the show included several newly made *sujnis* from Bihar, related to the Bengali examples but noticeably differing in stitching and design.
38. Norman, *Encounters: A Memoir*, pp. 266-68.
39. Stella Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Śiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981). For a glimpse of her richly layered installation of this exhibition, which broke new ground in museum practice, see Michael W. Meister, "Display as Structure and Revelation: On Seeing the Śiva Exhibition," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7, no. 4 (1981), pp. 84-89.
40. Stella Kramrisch, "The Ritual Arts of India," in *Aditi: The Living Arts of India* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), pp. 246-69.
41. Stella Kramrisch, *Painted Delight: Indian Paintings from Philadelphia Collections* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1986).



# Kanthā

STELLA KRAMRISCH

Kanthā means a patched cloth made of rags and the embroideries called 'Kanthā' and illustrated on Pls. X–XVI [see plates 3, 7, 9, 20, 24, 26, 33, 34, 38, 43, 45, 49] are stitched on rags. Rags of white cotton saris which have become worn out are sewn together almost invisibly and are frequently darned with white thread all over the field except where coloured threads drawn out of the borders of disused saris are stitched along the outlines, and fill the surface of the designs. Kanthās are made by women of all classes in Bengal, and chiefly in eastern Bengal. They are prepared in large and small sizes, from one foot square, to six by four foot in extent, and their use varies with their size. Thickly quilted (Lep Kanthā), they are a wrap for the body and are worn in winter; books and valuables of all kinds are wrapped in the 'bayton' (Pls. XII, XIV, etc. [see plates 3, 24]); mirrors and combs in the 'arshilatā'; the 'durjani' is used as a wallet, the 'ooār' as pillow cover, the 'sujni' as bed spread and it is spread on ceremonial occasions for seating honoured guests; hand-kerchiefs (rumāl) are also made in the same way.<sup>1</sup>

The technique is that of darning, the threads being drawn across the fabric in one direction, and the stitches are so close that the seams of the several rags are scarcely perceptible and the entire field of the Kanthā appears rippled (Pls. X; XVI, [see plates 43, 7]).<sup>2</sup>

It takes from six months to three generations to make a Kanthā.<sup>3</sup> No commercial incentive accelerates or vitiates the process of making a whole out of discarded, worthless bits. They are joined and reinforced by innumerable small stitches which give to the ground with its figures a new life and an ageless meaning.

Kanthās are given as presents on festival occasions. They are the work of women who design and stitch them. Their symbols and the connection of these symbols are most closely related to Ālpona drawings.<sup>4</sup> These are also made by women only, on festival occasions in execution of certain vows (vrata). They are drawn with powdered rice paste, on the mud floor, and form the 'basis' of the ritual. The rites are acted and the Ālpona is drawn. These rites are performed exclusively by women, by matrons (nārī vrata) and young girls (kumārī vrata) or by priests on behalf of women (śāstriya vrata). Men cannot draw the Ālponas nor do they embroider the Kanthās. The total stock of their designs is entrusted to the memory of the women. Stitch by stitch they realise the meaning of the ground which they cover even if they are unable to explain it. This ignorance of knowledge implies a correctness in doing things, an infallibility which is evident. It results in a display, in a manifestation where everything has its place in relation to the whole. The work of the hand in the Ālpona forms part of the ritual of the 'vrata.' The knowledge which goes to make a Kanthā and its execution stand in the place of the ritual; the symbols and their reference are identical.

The Ālpona is meant for the moment of the festival occasion. Once dried, the white rice paste which makes the design is quickly blown away. The knowledge of the Ālpona has permanence as long as it rests with the women and it can be activated into the corresponding design at any moment for which it is destined.<sup>5</sup>

The women of rural Bengal act as a repository of a knowledge from which each can draw at the given occa-

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Reprinted from Abanindranath Tagore and Stella Kramrisch, eds., *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 (1939), pp. 141–67. The plate numbers in roman numerals are Kramrisch's; they are followed in brackets by cross-references to the plate numbers in this volume.



sion, be it that of a ritual or in transmitting a token of friendship. In the *Kanthā*, the symbolic action is equally in the embroidery and in its material. It is embodied in its texture by restoring wholeness to rags, by joining the torn bits and tatters and by reinforcing them with a design of such a kind that when a *Kanthā* is spread out, it unfolds the meaning on which life is embroidered.

### Symbolism of the material

The textile symbolism of the *Kanthā* begins with the rags which are its foundation—and which itself is often reinforced by threads drawn across it—and it ends with the thread of coloured cotton which shows off the many designs. The foundation is made of rags, and this has been considered a sign of thrift of the Bengali women. So it is; it exemplifies that nothing is being wasted, useless bits are joined and acquire wholeness and a unity of meaning. This act of preservation carries with it and becomes the technique and symbolic form of an imperishable knowledge. It belongs especially to women. The needle and the thread string together the single parts of the object and also the maker of the object.

In the *Tanjur* (Rgyud 195.1)<sup>6</sup> is told the story of Guru Kantalipa (the 'rag-plastering' Guru), one of the eighty-four Siddhas. He was a sweeper and used to pick up rags from the rubbish heaps, and to stitch them together. While thus engaged one day he pricked his finger and began to weep. A *Ḍākinī* who happened to be near took human shape and, hearing the cause of his sorrow, she exclaimed: "If this slight pain already upsets you, what will you do in face of the untold sufferings which you will meet in the ever renewed cycle of becoming? Do you not want to be freed from it?" "I would," said Kantalipa, "but I do not know how to do it." The *Ḍākinī* thereupon instructed him in the art of meditation and gave him the following subject:

Śūnyatā is the space of the sky and also that between  
the rubbish.

With thought and knowledge thread the needle.

Sew the cloth with the needle of compassion.

Meditate to embrace all living beings in the three worlds.

The joining of the tatters, of meaningless rubbish, is achieved with thought and knowledge. They

dwell, in this formula, on *Śūnyatā*, the void which is everywhere the same, in the space of the sky, and between the particles of the rubbish heap as well. The needle of understanding, threaded with thought and knowledge, sews together the fabric; the tatters are joined, wholeness results and the living beings in the three worlds all find their place in it.

The story told here refers to the becoming, while making, whole. It leads to a meditation on the basis of sewing. Wholeness as state of being is symbolized by the wholeness of the cloth, which is a re-integration. In this sense also is to be understood the 'patched robe' (*saṅghāṭi*) worn by the Buddhist monk and by the Buddha. In the *Civara Khandhaka* the Buddha tells the monks to get sufficient material from rags taken from the dust heap or from bits picked up in the bazaar, and the making of the robe must be completed within twenty-four hours.<sup>7</sup>

The restoration of wholeness out of the tatters of daily wear is symbolized by the robe of the Buddhist monk. It covers his body, like a *Lep Kanthā*, with a fabric which has been re-united. His covered body moves in a world of wholeness, of rule and order.<sup>8</sup> The upright images of the Buddha show the *Tathāgata* standing or walking—and holding with his left hand the end of his robe, his patched outer garment. This is no chance gesture, nor is it derived from Hellenistic sculptures. Like certain *Mudrās*, it also occurs in *Gandhāran* works as generally as in sculptures of the various indigenous schools. It is not amongst the recorded *Mudrās*. As in the case of the shape and position of the *Uṣṇīṣa*,<sup>9</sup> the action of the hand holding the garment is also self-explanatory. The garment is the manifested universe, of which the multiple parts are joined into one, when they clothe the Buddha; this cloth the Buddha holds in his hand; images of other divinities hold other objects of which the meaning in a certain sense is analogous; the book for instance with its many leaves (*Mañjuśrī*, *Prajñāpāramitā*), or the lotus flower with its many petals (*Avalokiteśvara*, *Tārā*). The hand which invariably holds the patched cloth is the left hand.

The robe of the Buddha is a patchwork of rags, as is also the *Kanthā*. The rich embroidery on the ground of the latter is absent from the robe of the monk. The *Kanthās* are used as wraps and covers of



objects, and of the body. The manifested world in its state of order is wrapped round the Buddha; it is his 'saṅghāṭi' (literally: joined together) and covers the whole body in sculptures representing the Tathāgata (it leaves the right shoulder bare, on images of the Bodhisattva).

There are few images of divinities in India with their body bare; various pieces of apparel and jewelry clothe them; Kālī is shown in her nakedness, nothing envelops her: it is she who envelops everything. The same simile is used by the Digambara Jainas whose garment is the sky and by images of Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana mūrti, with the appearance of a naked beggar; there is nothing in between their body and the extent of the manifested universe; Kālī herself is entire manifestation and its absorption. Naked are also the Gopīs in the Vastraharaṇa scene—their clothes are taken by Kṛṣṇa. The scene plays in Vṛndavana; trees grow on the bank of the river and Kṛṣṇa sits in the centre of the tree in the middle and the garments are hung on its branches. Nudity as a condition of initiation is the state of the naked Gopīs, their clothes are up in the tree, around Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa is a form of Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is the sun, and the sun is beheld as the fruit of the tree of life. "When the sun is risen his banners (ketavaḥ), his rays are like shining fires."<sup>10</sup> The banners as shown in Indian reliefs (Bharhut, etc.) are streamers of cloth; folded scarves are waved at the same festive occasions when banners are flown. The garments of the Gopīs have returned to whom they belong. The sun has got back its rays, on rising; the 'absorption' of the Gopīs is illustrated in Indian paintings by the double symbolism of their nakedness and the return of their garments to their place of origin, to Kṛṣṇa, the sun of their life.

The garment as symbol of manifestation corresponds to the 'sheaths' (kośa) of Vedānta imagery. In actual worship, the images of the gods are clothed in silken and resplendent garments; the Śiva liṅga has a metal 'kośa'; for the purpose of worship the images and emblems are made more concretely manifest than by their form alone.

The entry into manifestation is also illustrated by the story and the corresponding reliefs of the birth scene of the Buddha when the guardian gods of the

four quarters approach with a piece of silk on which the child is to make the first seven steps on earth.

The garment (cloth) is a symbol of manifestation, of wholeness and integrity. Sacred texts written on palm leaf are wrapped into brightly coloured pieces of cloth. This gives a festive appearance to the libraries in Buddhist monasteries, and elsewhere. It is also held that the Buddha had received from his foster-mother Mahāprajāpati a garment of golden tissue; at the moment of attaining nirvāṇa he entrusted it to Kāśyapa, his disciple, who should give it to Maitreya, the future Buddha. Kāśyapa goes to Mount Kukuṭṭapādagiri. The mountain opens in front of him and he awaits the coming of Maitreya in the mountain.<sup>11</sup> The garment of manifestation given to the Buddha by his foster-mother Mahāprajāpati—the great mistress of creatures—the robe in which the Buddha-being is to be clothed, is transmitted by him through his disciple to the Buddha of the future. The continuity of the Buddha within manifestation is thus transmitted from Śākyamuni to Maitreya.

The wrap or cloth is a symbol of manifestation, the patched wrap or cloth as symbol of unification. The rags and tatters by themselves and prior to being joined have also their implied meaning. As far as their material is concerned, it is one with that of other textiles; as far as their condition is concerned, it is particularly their own. The worship of the Lord of rags and tatters, Chindiyadeo; the Saint of rags and tatters, Chirkuṭwā-Pīr, Lingri Pīr; the rag hero, Chithariya Vīr,<sup>12</sup> consists in the various provinces of Northern India and the Deccan in a rag thrown at, or presented to, their image or emblem. Chindiyadeo gives a new and whole cloth for the old rag, and similar exchanges and boons are granted by the other divinities. They join the piece to the whole, the wish to its fulfilment. In the lower Himalayas, rags are hung on cane bridges and trees near them, rags are tied to twigs and stones and they are planted on cairns, as offerings to the mountain spirit. The Buddhist prayer flags are scarcely more than such rags and the texts printed on them word the intention in which they are hoisted on bamboo posts; the Lataband mountain, 'mountain of rags,' has rags hung on its peak by the people so that they may obtain anything they want; while some offer the rags, others



take away one from each cairn and hang them round their neck.<sup>13</sup> The rag offering as an indication of joining the part to the whole on the side of the divinity has its corresponding action in the taking away of a rag from the heap, as a token of the wholeness into which it has been re-constituted and in which the wearer is now 'wrapped.'

Rags and prayer flags are put up as offerings on high places, cairns, trees and bamboos and so are the clothes of the Gopīs in the Vastraharaṇa scene. There they return to Kṛṣṇa; the rays are once more around the sun; the rag in every single act of offering means a return of the part to the whole, so that a new and whole cloth will be given for the stray, old bit; the prayer printed on a rag or flag is carried upwards into the Empyrean, Vyoma, the 'cover' or 'wrap,' the highest heaven.

Re-integration, the one possibility of the woven fabric: its being torn and worn, and joined again, is most intimately that of the Kanthā; the opposite and complementary symbolism needs also to be taken into account, i.e. that of initial wholeness. The cloth on which the Buddhist temple flag (prabhā) is painted must be woven to size. It must neither be cut nor joined.<sup>14</sup> A special sari, 'śrīkhaṇḍe,' uncut, and woven in one piece, is made by the village weavers to be worn by women in the fifth, seventh and ninth month of pregnancy.<sup>15</sup> This refers to the embryo, and it has its analogy with regard to the cosmos, the world-'egg' (brahmāṇḍa).<sup>16</sup>

The universe is frequently spoken of as a woven fabric,<sup>17</sup> where every one and every thing has its place, at the meeting of the main thread of the warp and the threads of the woof. The picture implies an indefinite number of horizontally spread out layers of the woof which are traversed by the vertical warp threads, so that each vertical thread passes through each of these layers and links them up in a close texture. The layers are the various states of existence, and each vertical thread unifies those states along its direction and with reference to the special point at which it traverses the entire horizontal stack. The vertical thread acts like a ladder of which the rungs are the horizontal threads of the woof on the various levels. Into this tissue is woven the macrocosm and the microcosm.<sup>18</sup> The main thread, the vertical, which

in each particular instance passes across the many levels, is known as Sūtrātman.<sup>19</sup>

Sacred texts are the world fabric in a likeness. They also are spoken of in textile terms as consisting of Sūtras (threads); the warp of the doctrine is given in the Tantras.

In the symbolism of the thread two meanings are leading: the warp in a web, and the thread sewn across a fabric already woven. The cosmic counterparts to them are beheld in the rays of sun and moon. The sun weaves, the moon sews the fabric of the universe.<sup>20</sup> The symbolism of the thread itself, apart from the fabric, is one of connection and obligation; ties, knots and ligatures bind the ultimate and the contingent. This symbolism belongs to the network technique 'jāla'<sup>21</sup> and only some of its uses can be indicated here, i.e. the 'upavīta' (cf. 'vyoma'), the sacred thread; or the thread tied round a branch of a tree and its remaining portion around the right wrist of the worshipper who utters the following Mantra: "O Lakṣmī, do not go away, do not go away, I tie you with this sacred thread."<sup>22</sup> Analogously and on a higher level, speech itself, "Vāc is the string and the names form the knots by which all beings are connected."<sup>23</sup> The connecting thread is either a straight line between a permanent origin and a particular instance or individual, or it makes a circle, a loop and knot.<sup>24</sup> The circle is whole, wholesome and protective;<sup>25</sup> the loop constitutes the emblem of the noose, which is held by Yama (Pāśin) the god of death. The shape of the noose is between that of the straight line and the circle, its symbolism is not original but functional.

## Symbolism of the form

In the last mentioned instances, the symbolism of the material<sup>26</sup> was seen to be supplemented by its form, as line, circle, etc. Having dwelt on the material symbolism of the Kanthā which is its foundation and contributes towards its 'design,' the latter, being truly a 'symbol' or 'synthesis,'<sup>27</sup> will now be viewed. The inseparable connection of Vratas, i.e.: certain rites, and Ālponas, of Ālpona and Kanthā design has already been referred to. Less obvious seems the relation of the Kanthā to the Yantra design, of which it must be considered a sub-variety. The central point,



the Bindu, and the Maṇḍala or the lotus, the two have in common.<sup>28</sup> Borders with several patterns replace in the Kanthā the enclosing and angular lines of the Yantra.

The conformity and interrelation of these designs suggests a common origin which is none other than that of the working of mind itself, its beginning from a point, the centre, its building up from there the radii and petals of the lotus, its reaching out towards its own fulfilment which is the circumference of the circle, its hovering there with marginal irradiations, dwelling on certain directions and altogether coming to a rest in the square or rectangular precinct of the 'Kanthā as a whole.' On this ground plan the many figures of the Kanthā are embroidered. The single figures are equivalent each to a Mudrā or seal. They are not shown engaged in action, the one with reference to the other<sup>29</sup>; they have their place with reference to the centre.

The central lotus is the most widely recurrent symbol (Pls. X, XII–XIV, XVI<sub>2</sub>, etc. [see plates 43, 24, 38, 49, 9, 3, 34, 20]). It has a varying number of petals, from four to 'thousand' and significantly enough but rarely five, or a multiple of five. For it is not the natural lotus flower but its aspect of being totally unfolded which is an emblem of cosmic manifestation. The total unfoldment around the centre is instanced by the varying figures of the field. The latter has generally a life tree in each of the four corners (Pls XII, XIII<sub>1</sub>, XIII<sub>3</sub> [see plates 24, 38, 9]). The square or rectangular field of the Kanthā, a restitution of the ordered fabric (of the cosmos) requires that the four corners are equivalent with four directions<sup>30</sup> and mark the four cardinal points. They give fixity and mark the limits. The four life trees are but the four-fold one tree of life which holds in its branches all manifestation. They grow from the four quarters, i.e. from everywhere, towards the centre.<sup>31</sup>

The display within the field is freely balanced. It fills the intervals between the central lotus and the borders. The central lotus itself is often enlarged by concentric bands of symbols which are also used in the border stripes; the latter are narrow or broad and have one or more bands, each with a different pattern and this may even change in the same band from one side of the Kanthā to the other (Pls. XIV<sub>1</sub>, XVI<sub>2</sub> [see

plates 3, 20] ); narrow stripes which copy weaving patterns<sup>32</sup> are embroidered right on the edges.

The material symbolism of the Kanthā, its being made of rags, joined invisibly, is that of a restitution of wholeness. The symbolism of the embroidery is that of universal manifestation and of a return to the centre; the disc of the central lotus and the trees in the corners pointing with their top to the centre are the 'leitmotiv.' The design of the Kanthā directly results from this dual symbolism. The rags when sewn together and reinforced by darning stitches<sup>33</sup> conform in shape with those of any woven fabric in its wholeness. It must be square or rectangular according to the threads which are interwoven at right angles. The four-cornered cloth has its fixed centre by folding it crosswise. The Bindu, the centre of the lotus wheel and the trees in diagonals are marked at the same time. The rest of the design is inserted consistently, concentric circles around the lotus and stripes or panels parallel with the edges, and as much as is left of the field between the central lotus and the edges is filled with figures. The proportions of central lotus, marginal stripes and the intervening field vary. The trees in the corners, the lotus in the centre are generally though not always present. Sometimes the trees are virtually present, Pl. XIV (see plates 3, 34), where they are embroidered in one or two corners out of the four—or in none of them, Pl. X (see plate 43). The diagonal direction implies their presence. In other cases the central lotus is absent and substituted by a bilateral symmetry of the design, in which it may appear, freely repeated (Pl. XI [see plate 45]), or its place is left empty and images and emblems are wreathed around its implicit presence (Pl. XVI<sub>1</sub> [see plate 7]).<sup>34</sup> The ideograms throughout the Kanthās consistently refer to one and the same reality; they can be exchanged, the one for the other (lotus for tree, for instance Pl. X [see plate 43]; leaf for tree, Pl. XVI<sub>1</sub> [see plate 7]) or else they can change into another, Kalkā into bird, tree into Vajra (Pl. XV<sub>1</sub> inner spandril, and second marginal border [see plate 52]) etc., in exactly the same manner as in Sāñcī on the railings of stūpa II, and in Bharhut, when the outer concentric circle around the lotus petals is transformed from one filled with scrolls into one of serpents or birds' heads.<sup>35</sup> The Protean



changeability of manifestation shows it derived from one principle, and results in similarity of form. The figures in the Kanthās belong to a world of metamorphosis, of similes which are identifications in legend, and form.

In this consistent world of pictures, the women who design<sup>36</sup> and embroider the Kanthās are free to employ their individual skill in executing any of the possibilities inherent in the theme and the technique<sup>37</sup> of the Kanthā.

The coloured threads, which are drawn out of the coloured borders of the disused saris, are black or/and blue, and red in the main, with a more or less considerable addition of yellow and green threads. The quantity of the two latter colours is greater in Kanthās where recourse is had to a variety of stitches besides the darning stitch. It may be concluded that originally the Kanthā had black or deep blue and red figures only on the white ground, these being the colours of the three Guṇas. Yellow and green in addition to these, correspond to their use in painted Maṇḍalas.<sup>38</sup>

The colour scheme, the distribution of surfaces, the 'style' varies from one Kanthā to the other. There are as many differences as there are different women who embroidered the patched cloths. These differences are equal to the many possibilities of one tradition and one craft under conditions of the rural life of Bengal which have not changed even outwardly. Of the hundreds of Kanthās seen by the writer only two were more or less alike; one of them is reproduced on Pl. XV<sub>2</sub> [see plate 33]). They seem to have been intended as a pair; the distribution of the symbols in the single 'bayton' lacks the usual balance.

None of the preserved Kanthās goes beyond the nineteenth century, and some are the work of more than one generation. Time has nothing to do with the symbolism of Kanthās nor with their making. The symbols stored in the Kanthās belong to the primeval images in which man beholds the universe. Their meaning is present in their shape and in the position and relation which these shapes have within the whole; symbol and composition are inseparable in the Kanthās.

Altogether only relatively recent survivals of textiles are preserved in India.<sup>39</sup> Of these, the Chamba

Rumāls and Kashmir shawls are partly connected with the Kanthās. The former are either purely geometrical or else pictorial. The symbols of the first variety are very limited in number; the second variety is a translation into embroidery of the paintings of the Western Himalayan hill schools of Kangra and Chamba. It is not an original textile form. The Kashmir shawls share with the Kanthā the life tree (Kalkā) and creeper devices, the circular centre and the demarcation of the four corners. Whether hand woven or embroidered, such as they are preserved they were made for the use of princes and the wealthy people from the time of the Moguls to this day. The range of symbols is small, the store of memory depleted.<sup>40</sup>

The Bengali Kanthās [Pls. X-XVI] on the other hand have conserved a full treasure. Guided by some of the symbols in these embroideries, the meaning is made clear of certain identical symbols on 'early' Indian sculptures and which as yet have not been explained. This refers to two instances, to the 'vardhamāna' symbol and to the spirals carved on the ends of the Toraṇa beams at Sāñcī.

### Vardhamāna

The Bayton Kanthā illustrated on Pl. XII (see plate 24) has the disc of the concentric central Maṇḍala beset with a number of radial devices. These are in more or less regular succession: a number of double spirals, an ellipse, double spirals and a 'standard.' The double spiral symbolises exactly what it shows, i.e. involution and evolution. Double spirals face the standards. In one case, i.e. on the right, upper standard, they are confronted, while the standard on the left has its upper part made of two addorsed double spirals; the surface between them and the point of the standard are filled with stitches in a contrasting colour. The double spirals and the standard with its point are the main elements of the Vardhamāna symbol.<sup>41</sup> The widest use of this emblem is made in Sāñcī, where the railing reliefs of stūpa II (about 110 B.C.) and the Toraṇas of stūpa I assign to it a paramount position. Some Bharhut reliefs have also to be referred to.<sup>42</sup> The double spirals, etc., on the Kanthā, Pl. XII [see plate 24] show more clearly than the



carved versions the essential parts of the Vardhamāna. The reliefs make the double spirals appear as if they were the outline only of a peculiar device, which has been called a 'shield device' or Śrīvatsa.<sup>43</sup> But it is not so much the field that matters; this is secondary. The outlines are the essential components, i.e. the two confronted double spirals—once they were given serpent shape in Sāñcī<sup>44</sup>—and the point of the central staff. A complete Vardhamāna results if the field between the point of the standard on the right in Pl. XII (see plate 24), and the lateral double spirals is seen as one surface. Thus it is carved in the 'early' reliefs: a double spiral on either side of a vertical axis; the point of the axis higher than the upper volutes of the symmetrical double spirals;<sup>45</sup> the two lower spirals connected by a line which repeats the curve of the upper horizontally connecting curves between the point of the staff and the spirals. This lower, horizontal curve with its central point is sometimes reduced to a yoke-line. The central staff is shown below it, as a hand or shaft of the standard, in Bharhut (Barua, op. cit., Pls. XXVII, 22; XXXV, 25). The latter relief shows four such symbols out of a total of sixteen, the other being eight lotuses and four 'triratnas' around a central lotus, akin in form and disposition to those on the Kanthā.

A relief of the railing of Sāñcī, stūpa II (op. cit., Pl. LXXXII 40a) has thin lines incised on the surface of the Vardhamāna, a vertical line in the centre, and others reminiscent of the veins of a leaf. The Vardhamāna transformed into two lateral, spiral leaves, one upright leaf in the centre, another broad leaf at the bottom, is very frequent in the earlier and later Sāñcī reliefs and occurs in many versions; in half-medallions, or serially in vertical rows; with or without the ground leaf<sup>46</sup>; the latter also belongs to other plant-symbols, in Sāñcī.

The central upright is the immutable axis, on either side of which the ceaseless process of evolution-involution, manifestation and absorption is figured as a double spiral. The spiral in this case is placed vertically, in the upward direction which is given by the central axis. The entire emblem is called Vardhamāna, i.e. increasing, growing; it is the symbol of the process of becoming (and un-becoming), along the immutable axis of being, and these two are united

in the shape of the emblem, in the early reliefs. The process of growth is shown furthermore by giving the curves a vegetation body. The zig-zag of crinkled leaves presents them in the process of unfolding; they are young leaves, growing up and opening.<sup>47</sup>

The Vardhamāna in the early Buddhist monuments is of equal value in position and number with the Triratna symbol.<sup>48</sup> The two are shown in juxtaposition (Bharhut, op. cit., Pl. XXXV, 25) or else the Triratna holds the Vardhamāna as its nucleus. This emblem, carved as bilateral relief, crowns symmetrically on either Torāṇa, the north and east gates of stūpa I, Sāñcī. It occupies the centre of the Triśūla and replaces the full extent of its central prong; the latter is only indicated, a small triangular shape and on its point is balanced the Vardhamāna. The Triśūla stands for triple time (trikāla); the Vardhamāna in it fills the present, the moment of 'becoming'; it is held by and touches upon past and future. The Triratna symbols shows (1) the Vardhamāna as the centre of (2) the Triśūla, and this emblem is supported (3) by the wheel of the sixteen-petalled lotus, in which is implied the presence of all the manifested worlds, the petals radiating into the four main and the intermediate directions. Everywhere and at all times, at every instant of becoming these standards on the Torāṇas proclaim the doctrine taught by the Buddha, who has gone beyond the ever renewed becoming.

The Triratna standards on top of the highest Torāṇa beam rest on a base. It consists of a rectangular post on a stepped plinth; on either side a tendril spiral-device, a volute, reaches up to the circle of the lotus rim. The spirals or scrolls on the upper end of these volutes are turned outward towards manifestation;—the spirals of the Vardhamāna, to the side of the central peak are always turned inward in the process of involution. Some of the leafy variations of the Vardhamāna, in archaeological literature called 'palmette' or 'honeysuckle,' show sometimes the upper scrolls turned inward, confronted, while in other instances they are turned outward, addorsed. They are emblems of becoming in its complementary stage of evolution and involution, of going out and coming back. In this sense not only vegetation, but also other living signs associate themselves with the double spiral. Today, in Ālpona designs in Bengal



the footprints of the Goddess have this shape<sup>49</sup> and they are combined in strict analogy to leafy Vardhamāna variations in Sāñcī, etc.<sup>50</sup>

### The spiral

The scroll and spiral, of which the double spiral is the most complete possibility, are key shapes of Indian art. The rambling, wavy line which issues from the mouth of elephants or Yakṣas and runs along the entire length of the coping stone of Bharhut<sup>51</sup> and on the lowermost Toraṇa beam on the south gate, etc. in Sāñcī is another variety, the most extensive one, while a third possibility is shown by the discs filled each by a closely winding spiral, as they are carved in pairs, on the end on each face of each of the beams of all Toraṇas, in Sāñcī. Between these two spiral discs, the beam extends curved like a yoke or like the line that connects the two base-spirals of the Vardhamāna emblem.

The convolutions of these two terminal spiral discs, along with the elastic curve of the yoke-like band—it is completely covered with reliefs—may be seen like a photographic film which is being unrolled, in order to show part of it, while the major part remains rolled up on either side. In this way some scenes are exposed to the glance of the pilgrims who come to visit the stūpa. They are a selection only from the vast repertory of scenes, which, one must know, are contained in the rolled up ends, in the spiral discs of the Toraṇa beams.

On the lowest beam of the Toraṇa of stūpa III, Sāñcī, the coils of the spiral are extended into the middle of the beam and terminate with serpent hoods, while part of the serpent body is laid in the waters which are carved with small waves and near the terminal discs. The serpent (Ananta) without end is the nearest shape, theriomorphically, to the coils of the spiral.<sup>52</sup> The Toraṇa of Bharhut ends with another emblem of the waters, the Makara. Its tail is turned up as terminal spiral. The Makara is the Vāhana of Varuṇa, and also the cognisance of Kāma. Kāma is the god of love. Varuṇa is Mr̥tyu, death.<sup>53</sup> Beginning and end of existence are breathed forth and swallowed up by the wide open jaws of the Makara as they are carved on the Bharhut Toraṇa. Its tail curls

up on the end of the Toraṇa beams, and alludes to the spiral. The Makara is considered foremost amongst the monsters and animals of the waters. The water is the symbol of possibilities. The development of the possibilities is figured as spiral; two of them confronted and turned in opposite directions show the two extreme possibilities, the entry into manifestation and the return to the dragon's mouth, or to the rolled up and invisible contents of the spiral disc, into the non-manifested.

### The Kanthās

The patched ground of the Kanthās is stitched across with symbols of manifestation. Their manifold reference to the centre has already been shown. A few Kanthās are illustrated on Pls. X–XVI. Their quality and style vary according to the natural endowment of the women who made them. With them also rests the selection of symbols, from the store of memory. The symbols are consistent throughout all Kanthās in existence and in every single Kanthā they are assigned their proper place.

Pl. X [see plate 43].<sup>54</sup> A Sujni Kanthā, 5'1" × 4'2"; colours: red, blue, yellow, very little green. Pale rose-blue effect on cream ground. The border is strengthened by coloured threads which are drawn all along the edges. A wavy line with circles,<sup>55</sup> the latter marked in the centre with wheel or vortex symbols, frames the field. Lotuses in the corners instead of the usual life trees, interspersed with four small lotuses; four circles with whirl design outside the central lotus have their reference to the fifth, in the middle of the central lotus.

The symbols are displayed along the diagonals and also along orthogonals which divide the field of the Kanthā into nine rectangles. Fish and birds are freely distributed along these directions, the two elephants are within the main diagonal zone, the figure of a horse is in the other diagonal. The only human figure—it is placed on the largest elephant—may be Indra if the objects held in his hands are a whip (?) and a net (?). The rider is more likely a spirit<sup>56</sup> and the other elephant and the horse (of blue colour) may be destined for similar rides. Doves, birds of Yama, and other birds, fish as emblems of

life and also as abodes of the spirit of the dead, form the constellations on this spacious Kanthā of suspended rhythms.

Pl. XI [see plate 45]. Inner field (4'2" x 1'9") of Kanthā, 6'4" x 3'10"; colours: red, black, very little yellow (middle panel only). Two life trees with lotuses of unequal size on top, grow towards the centre, in the middle of the central field of which the two long sides are occupied by rows of horses and elephants; intrusion of a horse facing the opposite way, in the row of elephants. The other horses cut across the central panel, two of them between the lotus tops of the trees, a small one at the bottom of one tree. Birds are perched on the branches, some peck at the flowers and pomegranates and others do not. They all belong to the family of 'sun and moon,' Indra and Soma, the two birds who keep on flying round the same tree. One eats the sweet Pippala, the other looks on.....on this tree all the birds build their nest (RV. 1.164.20; cf. also the parable of the birds of heaven which rest on the branches of the tree, Matt. 13: 31, 32). The stem of the tree is tripartite, it rises from three roots (cf. *Iḍā* and *Piṅgalā*, *Suśūmṇā* in the centre). Re. 'triple root' see also Pl. XV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 52], second marginal border.

The elephants picking up flowers are related to those who carry lotus flowers in *Bharhut*, the horses on the other side are fed from the same source as the birds; one bucket for two confronted animals is a frequent symbol in Mediterranean embroideries and other works.<sup>57</sup>

The borders of this Kanthā (only the innermost is shown on Pl. XI [see plate 45]) are: (1) *Kalkās* laid horizontally and separated by *Vajras* (cf. Pl. XV<sub>1</sub>, second marginal row [see plate 52]. (2) A broad band of circles, each circle made of four lancet leaves; lotuses in the centre of each circle; heart shaped leaves between the circles. —Nine leaves (plants) are sacred to *Durgā*. They are worshipped in the *Nāvapatṛka* rite. —(3) A row of upright *Kalkās*. (4) A row of concentric circles. The design of this Kanthā is compact, the colours are heavier than those of Pl. X [see plate 43]. The technique is similar to that of the Kanthās made by women of the weaver caste (Pl. XV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 52]). Large stitches and thick quilting.

Pl. XII [see plate 24]. A Bayton Kanthā, 3' x 2'10". Colours: light red, two shades of indigo blue, yellow and light yellowish green.<sup>58</sup> Central lotus with eight petals; within the concentric rings: life trees, circles, connected by 'wave' line, whirl stripes, scroll 'palmettes' (cf. *Vardhamāna*). The four ellipses are each filled with a *Vajra*, cf. also 'trees' on Pls. XV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 52]; they too are *Vajras*. Three of the four life trees, Pl. XII [see plate 24], consist of various leaf shapes, lancet, Betel and Pipal tree leaves, sacred to *Durgā*; the Pipal leaves are the emblem of *Śaṣṭhī*. Small wheels are connected with these leaves, by curves. The tree-candelabra, on the top left, is crowned by a large betel leaf and shows suspended from its 'pinnacle' a lamp (as used in mosques). The candelabra display of the life tree shows a light in the top of the tree in lieu of the sun as the fruit of the tree of life. The small *Trisūla* configurations within this tree are summed up in the tree on the right, top corner, with the outline of a cow's skull—a cow's skull is placed at the door before worshipping *Caṇḍī*. This 'taurine' tree makes a Pipal leaf take the place of the skull, the horns end in the shape of banana flowers. Such metamorphoses go on in this Kanthā; things are connected if their shapes are similar. The fourth tree is of the 'scroll-Kadamba' variety. Late 'Mogul plus Regency,' delicate flowers droop from the plants next to it. In its branches sit two birds, *Bihaṃgama* and *Bihaṃgamī*,<sup>59</sup> a large green parrot—the *Suka* who plucked a fruit of the tree of immortality<sup>60</sup>—confronts a gentleman in European dress and perched on a Regency chair.

Besides *Durgā* (*Caṇḍī*, *Śaṣṭhī*), the two main divinities whose presence this Kanthā shows, are *Indra* and *Śiva*. The large peacock (*sahasrākṣa*) on one of the life trees, the two horses and the elephant are *Indra*<sup>61</sup>; *Śiva*'s bull is there and carries on his back the lingam; another lingam stands below, and near the margin. Two human figures, one a *Gopa* (neat-herd), the other a woman,<sup>62</sup> are wedged between the emblems. 'Lotuses,' wheel-sun, pentalpha (*pañcakoṇa*) and whirls, etc., are freely distributed in the crowded field, fish and birds, too (cf. Pl. X and its spacious display [see plate 43]); along the edges, a floral creeper, a row of fish; on two adjacent sides leaves are put in a row, each with its stalk, in the process of



being connected variously amongst themselves, and also with life tree and bird shapes.

This Kanthā is about a century old; contemporary costume and style find their place amidst the ageless symbols.

Pl. XIII<sub>1</sub> [see plate 38]. Corner of Bayton Kanthā, 2'6" square, colours: blue and red; bordered panels along the edges, with life trees in the diagonals and in the four main directions, riders on horseback and elephant. The horses are 'pakṣirājas,' kings of birds, for their fleetness. They are placed on either side of a life tree; their riders are the Aśvins, who are day and night, and sun and moon<sup>63</sup>; an oil lamp burns near the one horse; peacocks in the spandril; '1000'-petalled lotus disc in the centre.

The crossing curves in the borders indicate interlaced serpents (with their heads shown, in Pl. XIV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 3]). This Kanthā is as old as the previous one.

Pl. XIII<sub>2</sub> [see plate 49]. Central portion of Kanthā, 3'6" x 1'10"; colours: deep red, and blue. The central hexagon consists of six-petalled 'flowers' with seeds or pistils in the inner hexagon. Haṃsas peck at the flowers.<sup>64</sup>

Pl. XIII<sub>3</sub> [see plate 9]. Bayton Kanthā, 2'8" square; colours: black, red, yellow, buff. The four irregular fields, each framed by a sari-border weaving pattern, show at the bottom: Durgā slaying Mahiṣāsura. The eight-armed goddess stands on her lion and the demon; above her high crown Śiva appears riding on his bull. She is accompanied by Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa; the field on the left encompasses a life tree, scroll and spirals and the words:

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Anitya saṃsār dekhā     | Impermanent is mundane existence behold, |
| Anitya śarīr sthir nāhi | Impermanent the body; it does not stay,  |
| Hay padma patrer nīr    | The water on a lotus leaf.               |
| Haribol Haribol         | Say Hari, say Hari,                      |
| Harinām satya           | The name of Hari is truth,               |
| Saṃsār anitya           | Mundane existence is impermanent.        |
| Eai khātār mālik        | This Kanthā's owner:                     |
| Śrī Hīrālāl Kuṇḍu       | Śrī Hīrālāl Kuṇḍu                        |

Our passing through existence, and the body are impermanent; they do not stay for ever, as little as water on a lotus leaf. This statement supplements the question which the Ḍākinī asked Guru Kantalipa. The whole lotus is shown with its 'thousand' petals and the life trees which grow towards the centre. Permanent symbols are stitched into the Kanthā and the dedication on it says why.<sup>65</sup>

Kalkā life trees carry their reduplications in the corners; they are also in the border along with Vajras filled with 'flowers.' Symbols and images are combined in the field of this Kanthā.

Pl. XIV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 3]. Bayton Kanthā, 2'11" square; colours: light blue, different reds, yellow and green. The narrow, innermost ring of the central lotus holds a row of lamps, threaded along the direction of their flames. This narrative Kanthā has a quick flux of outlines; the life trees are potentially present and indicated in one corner, by a small palm tree. Some scenes illustrate Bengali myths and the majority is from the Rāmāyaṇa. Each scene as a whole is an emblem, for instance the one at the bottom which illustrates 'the lady on the lotus,' Kamala Kāminī. The version of this story is given in the Caṇḍikā-Maṅgala of Kavikaṅkana Mukundarāma Cakravartī: Dhanapati, a Bengali merchant and worshipper of Śiva, derides the goddess Caṇḍī, prior to his departure for Ceylon. He incurs her wrath. All but one of his ships founder in a storm, and when he nears Ceylon, the goddess casts a spell on him. He sees a beautiful maiden seated on a lotus in the waters of Kālīdaha, repeatedly swallowing and vomiting a huge elephant. Dhanapati relates this story to the king of Ceylon, but fails to show to him the maiden and the miracle. Thereupon he is cast into prison.

In his absence his wife has given birth to his son. Śrīmanta grows up, a believer in Caṇḍī, sets out on a voyage in search of his father and sees the same vision in the waters of Kālīdaha. He also fails to make the king of Ceylon see it. His execution is ordered. On the execution ground he prays to Caṇḍī, the king of Ceylon sees the vision, marries his daughter to Śrīmanta and he and his father return to Bengal, with all their riches.

The Kanthā shows a large 'peacock-winged' boat, a Mayūrapakṣī, with a Makara ending of the hindpart. In

the boat are the king of Ceylon—an umbrella is held above his head, —Śrīmanta and oarsmen, behind him. A Kalkā life tree between the two main figures; below the flag of the boat, a Makara; on the left the vision of the beautiful maiden and the elephant.

This is an illustration of the initiatory symbol of navigation across the ocean,<sup>66</sup> the psychic domain which has to be crossed in order to come to the end. The Rākṣasī power of Kamala Kāminī, the swallowing and bringing up again of the elephant, is an image of the perils of sea and psyche. —The Makara and the peacock, which figures here as the Vāhana of Kārttikeya, confirm, and the life tree anticipates and makes present, the end of the journey, the conquest of peace and permanence.

The Rāmāyaṇa scenes: Rāma in his chariot—4 lingas, 2 life trees in the chariot on four four-spoked wheels—and aided by Hanumān; Rāvaṇa ten headed, the shooting of arrows; episodes of the story of Kārttikeya, Keśin and his retinue, etc. Bhūtas under a tree, a woman beating a man with a broom, “the woman who beats her son-in-law, the son-in-law’s father and stands in a coquettish way,”<sup>67</sup> surrounded by scorpions, Makaras, centipedes and weird, flying shapes are part of the witches’ vigil of the psychic domain, which is finally crossed and appeased by the happenings in the stories. They are wreathed around the disc of the lotus, the central and abiding seal.

The four margins contain: a row of fish; one of life trees, with lamps suspended on them (see also Kanthā Pl. XII [see plate 24]), another of three interlaced serpents, the fourth connects scrolls, wave and cross.

Pl. XIV<sub>2</sub> [see plate 34]. Bayton Kanthā, 3'3" × 3'1"; colours: light red and middle blue. Under each chariot a huge cobra, Śeṣanāga.<sup>68</sup> The large, male figures are possibly messengers of Yama, Yamadūtas, one of them holds a long noose.<sup>69</sup> This Kanthā turns its many figures and their parts (faces, etc.) ‘more geometrical’ into circles, squares and rectangles (see also the row of rectangles on top, with two dancers, confronted peacocks, etc.). Few of the wheels embroidered in this Kanthā are those of the cosmic vortex; all is ordered here and static. Triangular bird shapes, between the lotuses in the row on the left.

Pl. XV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 52]. Corner of Kanthā, 6' × 4'3½"; colours: black and red (not fast colour); very little yellow and blue. The names ‘Sim Tikhir Dāsundarī Devī’ are embroidered on the back of the Kanthā. It is a very good example of the work of women of the weaver (Yugī) caste. Black and red divide in bands the shapes of elephants, etc., also of the four-petalled lotuses laid in a ring around the central lotus.

The Kalkā life tree is repeated in the outer and inner corners and, in a row, along the margin. The outermost border is one of betel leaves, outlined by involuted spirals; a broader, inner border gives the complement to these scrolls; they are shown by the white ground, between the outer and the inscribed heart-shaped leaf. Heart-shaped are also the petals of the lotuses in the inner-ring.<sup>70</sup> Leaf, inverted triangle, heart, they all stand for the presence of the Śakti. Different from the Kalkā trees in the border are those of the tridents, which have a triple root (see Pl. XI [see plate 45]) and three branches and alternate Vajra-like, as above, so below, only inverted, with the Kalkās in the marginal band. The water zigzag in the innermost ring is a symbol which also occurs on neolithic objects; it is a weaving pattern and is also seen in the interstices between the male figures and the leaves or cones of life trees forming one of the main lateral rows. The figures have their arms raised and hold aloft some objects, possibly palm leaf fans or Yak tail whisks at the festival of the transplantation of rice, a rite of fertilisation performed by men.<sup>71</sup>

The Kanthās made by the women of the Yugī caste are less flexible in their display than all the other types of Kanthās. The self-imposed technique leads at times to clashes or omissions (cf. horse, etc., third row of margin) and also to clear and powerful rhythms. This Kanthā may have been used as an ‘ulloca’ (cf. *JISOA* 1937, p. 225).

Pl. XV<sub>2</sub> [see plate 33]. Bayton Kanthā (part of), 3'1" × 2'11"; colours: blue and red. The life tree is the main theme on this Kanthā. With a prolific number of Kadamba flowers or Cakras, its stem shows the central staff (or current) Caduceus-like straight between the lateral currents. Five more life trees in cusped niches form one broad, lateral band. Another such life tree is inserted into the context of chariot, elephants and



human figures. Those forming one group seem to hold branches plucked from the large tree of life.

Pl. XV<sub>3</sub> [see plate 26]. Small panel from a Sujni Kanthā; all the usual colours. Kadamba flowers with fish, bird and human figure. Human figures are very frequently shown with hands raised or lowered, the arms bent in the elbow and these are variations of the standard type; they are adaptations of the Vajra symbol to the human appearance, and in angular terms.<sup>72</sup>

Pl. XVI<sub>1</sub> [plate 7]. Ooār or pillow cover, 1'10" x 1'6"; colours: red, black, bright blue, blue-green and yellow. Iconographically this Kanthā is a synthesis of Śākta and Vaiṣṇava images above, and of the peacock and serpent symbols below, all within the four corners marked by Pipal leaves. They are in the place of life trees and are the emblem of Ṣaṣṭhī; her Vāhana, the cat, is embroidered near to Kālī-Kāla, Śiva, on whom Kālī dances; the next group is that of Kṛṣṇa playing the flute and Rādhā by his side standing on separate lotuses, one placed above the other and that of Rādhā is the broader shape and forms the basis of both the divinities. An attendant Gopī standing on a rug with tassels waves a fan.

Pipal leaves connect the upper row of images with the central and lower part. In the centre is the serpent and next to it a tree<sup>73</sup>; further Pipal leaves are around the two large peacocks. They hold a small serpent in their beaks. Their crowns are connected by a loop and leaf-like shape. Below, near the margin—it is marked by a few black stitches only—there is an ant, one of the shapes of Indra.<sup>74</sup>

The four corners of the Kanthā are occupied by Pipal leaves; the seemingly free display of some Pipal leaves in the field of the Kanthā is along the diagonals. The actual centre is left vacant. It is surrounded by serpent, leaves and lotuses, all emblems of potentiality and unfoldment, of becoming and manifestation wreathed around the central point, which is not marked but referred to by all the figures and their position.

The two peacocks are but one; the loop which connects their heads shows it, just as the life trees, in the four corners (Pls. XII, XIII<sub>3</sub> [see plates 24, 9]), are illustrations of the one tree of life. The peacocks

stand for Indra, the sun, and hold the serpent, a prey, i.e. passive potentiality which is raised from darkness to the nearness of the active principle; the serpent appears once more, large and holding the ground near the centre and wearing the crown.

Prakṛti, 'mother earth' and 'nature' in her various symbols, leaf, tree and serpent, surrounds the centre. The serpent upheld by the sun bird; Kālī who dances on Śivā<sup>75</sup>; Rādhā by the side of Kṛṣṇa, all these positions and symbols of the female in relation to the ultimate principle are displayed in this small Kanthā<sup>76</sup> and the entire display refers to the centre, the Bindu which is not marked nor given any shape.

Pl. XVI<sub>2</sub> [see plate 20]. Bayton Kanthā, 2'6" x 2'5"; colours: deep red, blue, green, orange, yellow. The ground is partly visible in some of the marginal bands only. All the rest is completely covered with embroidery, darning and flat stitches, in the liveliest colours. A change in the inner marginal designs adds to a seemingly bewildering display of well-known symbols in their proper places. The central lotus is the seal by which this Kanthā also is marked as belonging to the family of Yantras and Maṇḍalas.

The textile symbolism of the Kanthā is in its white ground; its patchwork is a reintegration, a restitution of wholeness and order. It is made manifest in the colourful display of the embroidery, in ever present symbols. The coloured threads of the embroidery pass across, strengthen and cover the white ground.

#### NOTES

1. G. S. Dutt, "The Art of the Kanthā," *Modern Review* 66, no. 4 (October 1939), pp. 457-61.

2. This may be called the pure and original technique of the Kanthā. Sometimes not all the ground is covered by the white quilting stitches and the parts left plain contrast with the rippled surface. Several layers of cloth are superimposed, thickness and quilted effect vary. The outlines of the figures are produced by running the thread across twice. This has a twofold result: a continuous outline and an almost identical appearance of the two sides of the Kanthā. The ripples are employed with special effectiveness when threads of the same colour are drawn parallel and with larger stitches within the outlined figures. Pl. XVI<sub>1</sub> [see plate 7] altogether makes use of this effect. The appliqué type of Kanthā will not be dealt with here.

3. D. C. Sen, *Bṛhad Baṅga*, vol. 1, pp. 430, 431.
4. See the plates in A. Tagore, *Baṅglār Brata* (Calcutta [1919]).
5. The oldest Kanthās still preserved do not go beyond the beginning of the last century. Some are still being made today. Alponas are drawn even today by young girls with a sure hand and at great speed.
6. I am indebted for the reference to Anagarika Govinda.
7. Mahāvagga VIII.142; Samuel Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese* (London, 1871), p. 216.
8. Unification is the action of the 'unique being,' the Buddha when on receiving four bowls of offerings, full of barley and honey from the Mahārājas of the four quarters of the world, the bowls fuse into one bowl, in his left hand. This is his pātra, the begging bowl.
9. Stella Kramrisch, "Emblems of the Universal Being," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 5 (1935), pp. 148–65.
10. Atharva Veda XIII.2.16.
11. Samuel Beal, *The Life of Hiuen Tsiang* (London, 1911), p. 142.
12. A. C. Lyall, *Gazetteer of Berar* (Bombay, 1870), p. 171; S. C. Mitra, "On a Curious Cult of Orissa," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, n.s., 30 (1934), p. 19; William Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (Oxford, 1926), p. 138; cf. also Kantheśvara Tirtha (Śiva Purāṇa), a place of pilgrimage sacred to the 'Lord of Kanthās.'
13. 'Abd al-Rahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan, and Mahomed Khan, Sultan mir munshi, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, vol. 1 (London, 1900), p. 218; Sven Hedin, *Trans-Himalaya: Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet* (New York, 1909), vol. 2, p. 200; L. A. Waddell, *Among the Himalayas* (New York, 1899), p. 115.
14. Marcelle Lalou, *Iconographie des étoffes peintes dans le Mañjus 'ri-mu 'lakalpa* (Paris, 1930), p. 27.
15. K. P. Mitra, "Customs and Taboos Observed by a West Bengal Woman from Pregnancy to Childbirth," *Man in India* 4 (1924), p. 177.
16. Garuḍa Purāṇa XV.25–30.
17. RV. VI.9.3, X.130.1; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. III.8.7–8; Muṇḍaka Up. II.2.5; Kramrisch, "Emblems of the Universal Being," p. 161.
18. AV. X.2.13; Br. Up. III.7.2., III.9.26.
19. Kramrisch, "Emblems of the Universal Being," p. 155.
20. Rākā, the full moon, is asked to sew with an unbreakable needle, RV. II.32.4. —This division is not strict. The old woman who resides in the moon is busy spinning; *Man in India* 10 (1930), p. 118. —The thread symbolism itself is not one of completeness: It is only a link between the absolute and the contingent. If it is beheld apart from this connection, the thinness of individual fate is seen as thread in the hands of Clotho (the spinner), Atropos and Lachesis.
21. Kramrisch, "Emblems of the Universal Being," pp. 160ff.
22. "A Note on the Dhātṛī Pūjā," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, n.s. 13 (1917), p. 321.
23. Aitareya Āraṇyaka II.1.6.1–2.
24. H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Punjab, 1911), vol. 1, p. 126. On the second day of the bright fortnight, people place the forefinger between their eyebrows, fling a cotton thread towards the moon, hoping to get a silver thread instead; —cf. situation and meaning of Buddhist and Tantrik: Ūṛṇā, Ajñā cakra, Candra maṇḍala.
25. Cf. Rakṣa—the protective thread, tied round the wooden foundation of the masonry shaft when digging wells—Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, p. 343; also the festival of 'Rakhī Pūrṇimā; —ibid., p. 408, also refers to a double thread ritual, when women wind a cotton thread 108 times around the trunk of a Pipal tree when a boy is invested with the sacred thread.
26. René Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la Croix* (Paris, 1931), chap. 4, deals with the symbolism of tissue.
27. The literal meaning is "thrown together" and "put together."
28. This applies to the majority, though not to all the Kanthās.
29. This does not exclude a considerable number of scenes from legends. These scenes with their figures however have one connected meaning, as is the case otherwise with each single symbol.
30. They correspond to the four intermediate directions, but not if the Kanthā is laid 'on edge' (Pl. XV<sub>2</sub> [see plate 33]).
31. The trees are mostly either 'Kadamba' trees, which are sacred to Kṛṣṇa and have round flower and fruit-balls; these are indigenous. The other variety are 'Kalkā' shapes, i.e. cones of which the point is drawn out into a hook. They are supported by a stand, or 'stem,' and have to be traced back to the pine tree pattern as woven in Kashmiri shawls and painted with a more or less straight or wind-tossed top in Persian and Indian miniatures. Barring the Kalkā-life tree, which is also very frequently repeated as a border pattern, no other Persian symbolic forms have found their way into the Kanthā.
32. One type of Kanthās (Pl. XV<sub>1</sub> [see plate 52]) is made by the women of the weaver (Yugī) caste. The designs are more geometrical, the length of the stitches are not equal. The single stitches are longer on the front than on the reverse side; bands predominate in borders and fields; and the band effect as colour contrast runs in any direction, parallel with the borders, diagonal and circular, right through the rows of figures (see the elephants, etc., Kalkā and lotuses in the inner rectangle; also the circle of four-petalled lotuses), within the sharply outlined silhouettes. Incidentally: Yugī, cf. Yogī, and that, according to *Man in India* 10 (1930), p. 248, "the members of the weaver (Yugī) caste, children under two years of age and persons who have renounced the world are buried, all others are burnt."
33. The white threads in the intervals between the figures are drawn parallel to the edge and they also run along the outlines of the figures. This shows that the darning of the ground



is subsequent upon the stitching of the outlines of the figures. In a large number of Kanthās it is omitted.

34. The 'presence' of the lotus, even if not embroidered in its proper place or altogether absent, is valid to the same extent throughout the Kanthās as that of the Buddha in the non-iconic early Buddhist reliefs of Sāñcī, Bharut, etc.

35. Beni Madhab Barua, *Barhut* (Calcutta, 1934), vol. 3, pl. 34, bottom, left; John Hubert Marshall and A. Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi* (Bombay, 1917), vol. 3, pl. 80, 33b; other examples from Bharhut are in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

36. The outlines are drawn with dark or reddish lines which mostly have disappeared after washing.

37. The original and ubiquitous darning stitch is supplemented by flat stitches in some examples (Pl. XV<sub>3</sub> [see plate 26]); borrowings from other types of embroidery occasionally occur and are used effectively (Pl. XVI<sub>2</sub> [see plate 34], etc.). The original technique (Pls. X, XIII, XVI, [see plates 43, 38, 52]) with the varieties it allows, attains a greater clarity.

38. Stella Kramrisch, *A Survey of Painting in the Deccan* (London, 1937), p. 203 nn. 34, 35. —Blue and yellow thread, called 'Kāma,' is used by the Ojhās for tying the amulets on the arm, waist and neck.

39. The oldest version of a textile fabric in terra-cotta, from Kauśāmbī, is reproduced for the first time, *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 (1939), pl. VII.16; the oldest painted version of a painted (or printed) cloth is in Śittanāvāśal. Cf. *ibid.*, pl. XXVII.

40. Their appeal to the contemporary Bengali women is shown by Kanthās being embroidered in this century to look like Kashmir shawls; a stunted and misled production.

41. Prof. Johnston has dealt with the Vardhamāna, in "Notes on Some Pali Words," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1931), pp. 588–92; "Vardhamāna and Śrīvatsa," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1932), pp. 393–98; and in a subsequent note, "On Vardhamāna Again," *ibid.*, p. 690; Dr. Coomaraswamy, "Notes on Indian Coins and Symbols," *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* (1927–28), pp. 180–82; *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (October 1931), and *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1939), p. 154, discussing certain Pali words, deals with the Vardhamāna.

42. Other 'early' occurrences of the Vardhamāna have been quoted by Coomaraswamy and Johnston. Re. Sāñcī, see: Marshall and Foucher, *Monuments of Sanchi*, 1940, railing of stūpa II: pls. 75.9b; 82.40a; 83.44c; 87.75b; 90.83b; 91.88a; and 'leafy' varieties: pls. 74.3a; 76.16b, 17b, 19a; 78.22a, etc.; on Torāṇas of stūpa I, apart from the North Torāṇa: pls. 39, 69a; leafy varieties: pls. 37a,b; 43, etc., 44b. Re. Bharhut, cf. Barua, *Barhut*, pls. 27.22; 35.25; and pls. 7 and 26.22 for leafy varieties.

43. Foucher, p. 172, says: "another symbol, the shield or Śrīvatsa, so far enigmatic. . . ." Cf. description of Pl. LXIXa, and also earlier authors, in the various *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Reports*; re. Śrīvatsa, see Coomaraswamy, *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*. The double spirals like the svastika belong

to the symbols which occur at all times and everywhere. The Vardhamāna is a specially Indian synthesis of double spirals.

44. Marshall and Foucher, *Monuments of Sanchi*, pl. 84.53b.

45. If it is said that the 'vaddhamānaya' is 'svastikapañcaka' (Johnston, "Notes on Some Pali Words," p. 591), it refers to the five points of the Vardhamāna, i.e. the four scrolls and the point of the vertical axis; the two upper scrolls and the point of the axis are referred to in the Divyāvadāna (Johnston, "On Vardhamāna Again," p. 690) when the asterism Puṣya is described as 'tritāram vardhamāna saṁsthānam.' The three stars of the asterism recall the leafy and also the more purely linear Vardhamānas in which the lower part (the broad bottom leaf) is not shown. Svastikapañcaka does not refer to five svastikas; it means that the five points of the Vardhamāna are 'svastika' emblems, that 'it is well' (su asti).

46. A half roundel filled with half a lotus often replaces it, and not only in the reliefs, but also in the main bilateral emblem on the Torāṇa of Bharhut (Barua, *Barhut*, pl. 17). This emblem also belongs to the Vardhamāna family. Its central point holds aloft the Cakra.

47. 'Vardhamāna' is also the Sanskrit name of the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*); it is so called from its rapid growth.

48. 'Triratna' (three jewels) is the name of this symbol; Foucher, p. 172, and others call it also 'nandipada' or taurine. We adhere to the name Triratna; there are three 'jewels,' the Cakra, the Triśūla and the Vardhamāna, corresponding the the Buddha, Dharma and Saṁgha.

49. A. Tagore, *Bāṅglār Brata*, pls. 20, 76, 77, 114; five lines or curves stand for the toes; pl. 96 shows the footprints on either side of a central field or 'shield' of which the apex is particularly marked with a point, identical with that of the Vardhamāna, in shape, position and meaning.

50. The Vardhamāna is frequent on seals, for instance found in Basarh, cf. *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report*, 1913–14, pls. 46.166, etc., p. 152; and also on coins of Arakan, see: Arthur Purves Phayre, *Coins of Arakan, of Pegu and of Burma* (London, 1882), pl. 5.6, 7; pl. 2.10. An Aṅkuśa is here placed inside the Vardhamāna (cf. Aṅkuśa as part of coiffure of two terra-cotta figures from Kauśāmbī, *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 [1939], p. 99). In Ālpona designs a full circle (Bindu) with outer concentric ring lines is inside the field of the Vardhamāna (Tagore, *Bāṅglār Brata*, pl. 98).

51. Stella Kramrisch, *Grundzüge der indischen Kunst* (Hellerau bei Dresden, 1924), p. 23.

52. The spandrels close to the spiral discs are almost always filled by the leafy Vardhamāna. These symbols belong together in the world of thinking in pictures and form.

53. Love and death, two forms of one principle, coincide in an intensity of realisation. Cf. Jayadeva, Gitagovinda, 'Love is the tiger, who springs on her like Yama' (the god of death); translated by William Jones, "Gitagovinda, or The Songs of Jayadēva," *Asiatick Researches* 3 (1796), p. 384; re. Makara, see

Coomaraswamy, "An Indian Crocodile," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 34, pp. 26–27, and Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas: Part 2* (Washington, DC, 1931), pp. 47–56.

54. The Kanthās illustrated in Pls. X–XVI [see plates 3, 9, 20, 24, 26, 33, 34, 38, 43, 45, 49, 52] are from villages in the Jessore District, Bengal. Pl. XVI, [see plate 7] is from Mymensingh.

55. Cf. Bharhut, coping stone, etc.

56. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7 (1939), p. 101. Re. Indra, cf. RV. III.33.11 and AV. VIII.8.5.

57. The whole of this primordial scene has an analogy in one of the engraved silver vases from Maikop, Kuban (Eremitage), third millennium B.C. —Birds in India frequently rest on the back of a horse, elephant, etc.

58. The colours of all the Kanthās (with the exception of Pl. XV, [see plate 52]) are fast; indigo, aloe and turmeric, and green (indigo and turmeric).

59. They are immortal (cf. L.B. Dey, *Folk Tales of Bengal* [1883], p. 38). Their young ones are also spoken of. They belong to the same flock of birds as those on the life trees, Pl. XI (see plate 45).

60. Ibid., tale X.

61. One name of Indra is 'Ulūka,' the owl. The owl with its yellow moon eyes (Pl. XII [see plate 24]) dances—cf. G. S. Dutt, "The Brata Dance of Rajghat," *Modern Review* (1933) p. 646, when Sitalā is besought in the name of Śiva, —close to the thousand eyes of the sun-peacock.

62. Cf. the 'Khopa' in a song quoted by G. S. Dutt, "The Tiger's God in Bengal Art," *Modern Review* (1932), pp. 520–29.

63. Yāska, *Nirukta*, XII.1, Muir Sanskrit Texts V.234.

64. Cf. Hamsas on the drum of Mauryan capitals; for inst. lion capital, Rampurvā.

65. The elephant in the panel on the next side has ten and a half heads in one line linked up with the saddle—as riders?—a twelfth head is separately outlined. The twelve Ādityas? The fourth panel has a rider on a stiff-legged horse—possibly a hobby horse on which rides a Bhakta, taking part in a processional dance; peacock, horse, etc., in the same panel.

66. René Guénon, "De la confusion du psychique et du spirituel," *Voile d'Isis* (1935), p. 89.

67. Every temple site is surrounded by the world serpent, the temple being the world in a likeness. This holds good also for the house. In Bengal, a line representing a snake is drawn around a house . . . cf. E. A. Gait, *Census Report* (Bengal, 1902).

68. Cf. verses chanted by beggars; quoted by Dutt, "The Tiger's God," p. 525.

69. Bhaktas hold long canes with round loops; the handle of the loop on the embroidery shows too strong a curve for a cane.

70. Cf. rows of hearts on Sasanian eighth-century metal plates and ewers (Eremitage); animals with foliate tails, cf. Kanthā on Pl. XII [see plate 24], are also found there.

71. Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, p. 50.

72. Cf. Ālponas, *Bāṅglār Brata*, pls. 85–87, with the central axis extended into the lower half of the Vajra.

73. One of the nine plants sacred to Durgā.

74. RV. 1.51.9. This shape Indra took in his fight against Vṛtra, the serpent. —Or it may be a bee (madhukāra) and also mean Indra.

75. By this contact Kālī evokes and is charged with Śiva's energy.

76. The name embroidered on the left is Benal (Bimal) Kāminī. The spelling is defective.







# PLATE 1

Undivided Bengal  
Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, running, marking cross, cross, dot, eye, stem filling, fern, and seed stitches

37½ x 37½ inches (95.3 x 95.3 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-705

Inscribed at right: *angme [ange?] ei bastre / likhilam iti / shri haricarane ashi / kamala ——— shini dashi [(draped with) this cloth on my body, I write thus, at the feet of Hari (Krishna/Vishnu), his servant (devotee) Kamala; shri shri radha krishna / om bindabane sh?olo ———? / kore [?chhe]n tahar ki [tada?] [(In Brindaban (Krishna's childhood home), Radha and Krishna did?); inscribed at bottom: danakhanda [The Toll Collection episode (dana = gift/offering)]*

Among the most exquisitely detailed of all known pieces, this kantha is also one of the most carefully structured and nuanced in its presentation of Gaudiya Vaishnava devotional imagery. Each of the four sides depicts a key episode from Krishna's early life. Scenes of baby Krishna stealing butter and youthful Krishna fluting to the *gopis* (cowherd women) at left and right are set within architectural frames. These balance

Krishna on the composite horse (*navanari-gunjara*) and as ferryman (combining the *naukavilas* and *danakhanda*) at top and bottom.<sup>2</sup> The embroiderer carefully contrasts the conical breasts of the young women forming the horse with the drooping ones of the old widow in the boat. The sacred pink-and-blue lotus flowers and the *kadamba* trees at the corners are equally explicit.<sup>3</sup>





## PLATE 2

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, eye, and fern stitches

32 x 34 7/8 inches (81.3 x 87.1 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-700

Krishna ferries the *gopis* (top) and steals his mother's butter (right). While this embroiderer reduces the number of *gopis* in the boat and minimizes the architecture compared to the same scenes in plate 1, she retains the essential narrative elements. For example, she indicates the women's married status by house keys at

their waists rather than *sindur* (vermillion powder) in their hair. At bottom, the four-armed goddess Ganga, personification of the Ganges River, sits atop her *makara* (a mythical fish-crocodile with elephant trunk). Near her, two dandies ride an elephant while, at left, three turbaned men sit atop a single horse.





### PLATE 3

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, split, running, eye, dot, and fern stitches

33 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches (85.1 x 85.1 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-703

Inscribed at left: *Ya Allah*

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XIV,

This frugally stitched kantha holds a medley of intertwined motifs that make it one of the richest in meaning.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most significant is a small roundel bearing the Muslim invocation of God (*Ya Allah*), placed just below a satirical scene of an effete *babu* being beaten with a broom by his wife or mistress (left). The imagery also includes a variety of stories drawn from the Bengali Hindu narrative tradition, including (counterclockwise from bottom) the mer-

chant's vision of Kamalekamini (the goddess Chandi rising from the ocean on a lotus), the divine hero Rama battling multi-headed demon Ravana, and the beloved *vastraharana* episode in which Krishna absconds to a treetop with the bathing *gopis'* clothes.<sup>5</sup> Extensive red underdrawing with sophisticated three-quarter faces is visible especially below this last motif where the embroidery deviates from the drawn lines.





#### PLATE 4

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin, split, running, eye, fishbone, and dot stitches

65 x 40 1/4 inches (165.1 x 102.2 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-10

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 120, cat. 440;

Basak 2007, p. 83, plate 73

Religious narratives and comments on city life blend here in equal measures. The former include the vision of Kamalekamini (left border), Krishna astride a horse of *gopis* and a similarly inhabited elephant (bottom and top panels, respectively), and the deities Durga on her lion (top panel) and Shiva on his bull (left border). The latter embraces depictions of Bengal's urban elite enjoying music, dance, and a pleasure boat ride, as

well as stock scenes of exaggerated gender reversal intended to highlight society's moral decline.<sup>6</sup> In the upper panel, a red horse sits astride a crawling man who holds the strings of a hot-air balloon. The embroiderer seems to have combined the satirical image of a horse riding a man with that of a popular Calcutta circus act involving a girl parachuting from a balloon onto a running horse.<sup>7</sup>





# PLATE 5

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, outline, satin, running, eye, surface satin, fern, zig zag, stem stitch shading, dot, and seed stitches  
65 x 45 inches (165.1 x 114.3 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-684

Published: Kramrisch 1968, plate XLVII (detail)  
and p. 119, cat. 435; Kramrisch 1989, p. 78

This kantha is closely related in format and style to plate 4 but contains no explicitly "Hindu" narrative imagery.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, certain images, such as the line of men with sticks (right border) or the tiger-rider (left border), may reflect Muslim festivals and practices.<sup>9</sup> Elaborate scenes of urban pleasures include two *babus* embracing their *bibis* (lower panel) and similar couples enjoying a jaunt in

a *mayurpankhi* (top border) that also shows peacock legs dangling from its avian prow. The left border contains, at bottom, two broom-beaten *babus* separated by two equally passive sheep,<sup>10</sup> and, above them, six elephant riders holding round fans.<sup>11</sup> Like the previous pieces, this kantha is *dorukha* (double-sided), as a virtually identical mirror image appears on its reverse.





# PLATE 6

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin,  
running, arrowhead, seed, zig zag variation,  
cross variation, and fern stitches  
25 x 30 inches (63.5 x 76.2 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-685

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 21, plate 3;  
Kramrisch 1968, plates XLIII, XLV (details), and  
p. 120, cat. 443; Mode and Chandra 1985,  
p. 229, fig. 319, and p. 22, fig. 230; Kramrisch  
1989, p. 81 (detail)

The impressive borders and luxuriously  
stitched corner *kalkas* imply some connec-  
tion with the art of weaving, as does the  
mere shadow of stitching visible on the

reverse.<sup>12</sup> While this kantha is not accom-  
plished in its draftsmanship, its rubbery fig-  
ures and uninhibited composition imbue  
both rhythm and charm. At bottom, Radha  
and the *gopis* float above a *mayurpankhi*  
while Krishna swoops from its stern to con-  
spire with a pillarlike widow.<sup>13</sup> Dark blue  
lines to either side of the boat evoke the  
Ganges River, while four-armed Ganga  
rides a sketchy blue *makara* on similarly

abbreviated waters (right quadrant). The  
familiar motif of Krishna as butter thief sep-  
arates boat and goddess. The top panel  
contains another goddess, the fierce Kali,  
here combined with Krishna, along with  
Ravana and his bow-wielding adversaries.<sup>14</sup>  
A great flying insect replaces the seedpod  
of the unusual "thousand-petaled" lots.





## PLATE 7

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, darning, satin, running, and seed  
stitches  
19½ x 18½ inches (49.5 x 47 cm)  
Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-6

Inscribed along upper left border: *bemal kamini* [Bemal Kamini]

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XVI; Kram-  
risch 1968, pp. 120–21, cat. 445; Basak 2007,  
p. 97, plate 75

The name Bemal (or Bimal) Kamini stitched  
on this kantha is likely that of the embroi-  
derer, but may also be the recipient. Pattern

darning (*chatai*) fills nearly every motif to  
create the distinctive striped effect.<sup>15</sup> Kram-  
risch called this small, borderless piece an  
*owar* (pillow cover; see plate 49), although  
its iconography may indicate a more ritual  
function as an *ashan* (*puja* seat). The betel or  
figus leaves that serve as corner motifs are  
the only nod toward a radial composition. In  
the lower half, two peacocks battle over a  
snake, their wings raised. The upper half

holds, from left to right, Kali standing over a  
corpse, brandishing her ritual chopper and a  
severed head, with additional body parts  
strewn near her catlike companion; flute-  
playing Krishna with Radha on a lotus; and  
a fan-bearing attendant on a rectangular  
mat (perhaps a kantha). Nuances of compo-  
sition imply that these figures narrate the  
Bengali tale of Krishna's miraculous trans-  
formation into Kali.<sup>16</sup>





# PLATE 8

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, seed, fern, eye, dot, and zig zag stitches

32 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches (82.6 x 77.5 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-707

To the right stand four male figures with upraised arms; at the bottom a similar figure flanks an auspicious knot created from intertwined snakes.<sup>17</sup> The left side displays Kali on Shiva's corpse near what may be a mounted hunter attacking a wild boar. At the top, an elephant bears a prone figure near a second cross-legged figure. While the images on the reverse mirror those on the front, this embroiderer does not appear

to have stitched consistently from one side. As is evident by their clarity and technique, most motifs were stitched from the side shown here; Kali and the other figures on the left, however, were worked from the opposite side of the cloth. Furthermore, since convention dictates that the head of the corpse project to Kali's proper right, the embroiderer apparently drew each motif on the same side from which she stitched it.<sup>18</sup>





# PLATE 9

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, split, running, and dot stitches

32 x 32 inches (81.3 x 81.3 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-14

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XIII.; Kramrisch 1968, p. 118, cat. 425; Basak 2007, pp. 49, 92

Inscribed at left (in black with blue additions):  
*Anitya shangshar dekho anitya sharer / sthir nahi  
 hay padma patrer nir / haribol / haribol / harinam /  
 n[il]itya shangshar anitya* [The world is ephemeral  
 Look, the body is ephemeral. Water does  
 not stay on a lotus leaf. Call out the name of  
 Hari (god; Krishna-Vishnu), call out the name Hari,  
 in Hari's name. Reality is that the world is  
 ephemeral.] *Ei khatar malik sr[i] hiralal b[—?]*  
 [The owner of this kantha is Mr. Hiralal  
 B[anda—?]

The wide border and florid corner *kalkas* show a leaning toward woven forms.<sup>19</sup> At bottom, the goddess Durga is depicted with the arched backpiece of a festival icon. Scrolling foliage lends prominence to the poetic inscription on the left. A second perpendicular line gives the owner's name.<sup>20</sup> However, the name is stitched in a blue thread rarely appearing elsewhere on the piece, opening the possibility that it was

reworked when the kantha passed to a later owner. The horse on the right, with its cross-hatched body and spiky mane and tail, is reminiscent of metal sculptures in the *dokra* (resin-thread) technique popular across the region. At top, an elephant supports a row of mustachioed human heads stitched in black and red thread mimicking weaving, a resemblance accentuated by the linear quality of the single head nearby.<sup>21</sup>





# PLATE 10

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, satin, running, dot, eye, and fern stitches

31 x 27 1/4 inches (78.7 x 69.2 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-676

Women in striped skirts flank a nine-headed male figure, presumably the demon Ravana, who wears a short jacket, black shoes, and long pants with central drop, probably representing a dhoti. At the right stands a row of six men, all but one of whom raise their left arms. Their clothing matches the nine-headed figure's except for the red hat hovering above each man's head. Across from

them stands another row of figures, also with raised left arms, red hats, and short jackets, but in brightly and variously patterned undivided lower garments. The hats indicate that they, too, are men, but are wearing sarongs or *lungis*.<sup>22</sup> However, this format more often opposes male and female figures (see plates 23 and 79).





# PLATE 11

Faridpur, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
1875

Plain weave cotton with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, darning, satin, split, running,  
eye, and dot stitches

31 1/4 x 29 inches (79.4 x 73.7 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-8

Inscribed at bottom center: *sam[vat] 1282 [1875]*

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 26, plate 9;  
Kramrisch 1968, p. 120, cat. 436; Basak 2007,  
p. 98, plate 76 (detail)

With its prominent stitched Bengali-era  
date equivalent to 1875, this kantha is a  
crucial touchstone because only a few  
pieces dated prior to the twentieth century  
are known.<sup>23</sup> It is equally significant for its  
intricate narrative imagery. Episodes from

the story of the Bengali snake goddess  
Manasa and the valiant Behula include the  
iron house with incoming snakes (bottom  
right), the goddess embodied as a snake-  
flanked water pot (lower left), and a cross-  
legged man on a dais (top center) who may  
be Chand Sadagar, Behula's wealthy father-  
in-law.<sup>24</sup> These are interwoven with scenes  
from the epic *Ramayana*, including the  
abduction of Sita and a battle between the

monkeys and demons (right), and Rama  
and Sita enthroned above monkeys (bot-  
tom left). Along the left side, women attend  
a male figure with peacock crown but  
uncrossed legs, who seems to hold a horn  
rather than a flute, tentatively identifying  
him as Krishna's brother Balarama.<sup>25</sup>





# PLATE 12

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, chain, and running stitches  
9 x 9 inches (22.9 x 22.9 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-710



# PLATE 13

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, darning, and running  
stitches

6 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches (16.5 x 16.5 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-711

These two surprisingly similar small squares, which may have been intended for use over small pillows, are composed of concentric rows of open spiraling and scrolling border patterns. Four of the patterns are identical, as is the buttonhole edging, first worked in blue and then in red. In pattern and technique they relate closely to

a small rectangular quilt in the Bonovitz Collection (see plate 72). While nonfigural kanthas composed of border patterning alone (*par tola*) are rare in these two collections, they are common among the larger corpus, although few show such delicately linear treatment.<sup>26</sup>





# PLATE 14

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, and fishbone stitches

34 1/4 x 34 1/4 (88.3 x 88.3 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-7

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 27, plate 10;

Kramrisch 1968, p. 120, cat. 437

A great ascetic Shiva in yellow, with wild, long hair and beard, lounges in apparent nudity but for red ornaments that match his rosary. His ubiquitous snake climbs his right side, while the goddess Parvati sits at his left, demurely covering her head as should a wife in her husband's presence. In the

opposite quadrant, a second yellow figure with a rosary may be one of Shiva's ascetic followers. Several blue *lingas*, the rounded pillar that is the mark of this god, are set into their socket-bases (*yonis*). At right a shrine with ridged<sup>27</sup> roof and arched entries contains a blue figure that may be the flut-

ing Krishna. A distinctive aspect of this piece is the three heads, each cleanly ending at the neck, that may be a form of the local deity Dakshin Ray, the tiger god.<sup>28</sup> Embroiderers often blended elements across sectarian boundaries, as these had little meaning in daily faith.





# PLATE 15

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, running, eye, arrowhead, and fern stitches

32 x 31 1/4 inches (81.3 x 79.4 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-687

Pairs of exuberant floral trees to the left and right grow in opposite directions from a floating "ground" of border motif, rather like reflections in water, although each tree is different. The corner *kalkas* are equally imaginative in that their interiors do not follow the outlines of their exteriors. The top quadrant holds a lively red horse and a triangular shrine housing a Shiva *linga*. At bottom a

monstrous goddess Kali raises four massive arms, one blithely swinging a severed head. Her body, with its distinctive double-block torso, is outlined in red and filled with blue stitches. The corpse below her feet is yellow outlined in green, and an adjacent blue elephant holds a second yellow-and-green figure, perhaps the living Shiva.





# PLATE 16

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, running, dot, stem stitch shading, and seed stitches

39 1/2 x 36 1/2 inches (100.3 x 92.7 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-695

Inscribed on reverse (in English), at upper left: *To Dr. Stella Kramrisch*; at lower right: *To / S.K. / R.C.*

This colorful kantha (this photograph shows its reverse) is crammed full of long-legged, peak-headed people perched on equally leggy animals, some of which seem to have six or more legs, thanks to the

embroiderer's creative overlapping of human and animal forms. The two inscriptions to Stella Kramrisch (lower right and upper left corners), written in English using a pink thread and knot technique unlike other embroidery on the piece, were clearly later additions. While the identity of the donor—whose initials "R.C." (or perhaps

"R.C.I.") appear in the lower right—is unknown, the very fact that this kantha was a gift demonstrates that Kramrisch did not personally select all of the pieces in her collection, although she did, of course, choose to keep them.





# PLATE 17

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, buttonhole, darning, outline, satin, split,  
 running, and marking cross stitches  
 32 x 30 1/2 inches (81.3 x 77.5 cm)  
 Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-15

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 118, cat. 423

Within a diamond border that replicates a  
 common woven form is a wider band of  
 vertical *kalkas* that alternate with tuliplike  
 trees. Elaborate corner *kalkas* frame a large  
 central motif consisting primarily of inter-  
 woven hexagons.<sup>29</sup> The narrow field around

these motifs is filled with foliage, a few ani-  
 mals, and a pair of men on red horses, per-  
 haps brandishing swords at one another.  
 Along with deep indigo thread, a lighter  
 blue-gray thread (now faded to a variety of  
 shades) was also used.





# PLATE 18

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, running, arrowhead, modified arrowhead, seed, eye, fern, stem filling, and dot stitches

33 1/4 x 33 1/4 inches (85.7 x 85.7 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-712

On this kantha stand a woman (left) and a man (right, although this figure's gender is somewhat ambiguous), each with right arm raised and flanked by a pair of fish. In Bengal, the presentation, preparation, and consumption of fish play a major role in the

celebrations and rituals of the region, such as those surrounding marriage and those done in honor of the goddess Lakshmi. In general, fish represent abundance, prosperity, and fertility; pairs of fish are also auspicious.<sup>30</sup>





# PLATE 19

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery  
 in back, buttonhole, darning, outline, satin,  
 split, running, seed, fern, dot, and zig zag  
 variation stitches  
 29 x 30 inches (73.7 x 76.2 cm)  
 Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-680

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 24, plate 6;  
 Kramrisch 1968, plate XLVI and p. 119, cat. 433

Red, navy, and saffron threads intertwine in  
 a wide border of blossom and spiral  
 roundels within a diagonal grid. Parrot-  
 green threads enhance the vivid palette in  
 the quartet of motifs around the central  
 lotus—a swayback red horse with rider,

green peacock perched on a blue elephant  
 with bright red tusk, a knobby-kneed pea-  
 cock, and a rainbow elephant with red rider.  
 The human figures have distinctive triangu-  
 lar torsos, bulging hips, and muscular arms  
 with pointed elbows. The animals are  
 equally idiosyncratic; the elephants, for  
 example, each sport a triple forehead  
 bulge, as well as bent outer and straight

inner legs with large toes. Corner trees with  
 delicately undulating branches, several  
 with roselike saffron-and-red flowers, com-  
 plete this orderly and airy composition.





**PLATE 20**  
Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Second half of the nineteenth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, chain, darning, satin, running, dot, and  
seed stitches  
28 1/4 x 28 1/2 inches (73 x 72.4 cm)  
Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-12

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XVI<sub>2</sub>; Kram-  
risch 1968, plate XXXVII (detail) and p. 120,  
cat. 439; Basak 2007, p. 48

Color, pattern, and an energy verging on  
psychosis collide in this magnificent explo-  
sion of a quilt. With its impenetrable mass  
of flora and figures, it seems to bear no  
resemblance to the well-ventilated compo-

sition on the facing page, sharing only the  
vivid palette and floral-grid border.<sup>31</sup> A  
closer look, however, reveals a swayback  
red horse at bottom, a familiar blue ele-  
phant at right, and, at top, a peacock amid  
clouds of red and green feathers easily mis-  
taken for foliage. The horseman clearly  
draws from the same anatomical model as  
the figures in plate 19. The other figures

that fill the left side and two corners share  
the same triangular torsos as figures in  
plate 19, but here their muscular arms  
transform into writhing serpents, outlines  
waver, and bodies dissipate like shattered  
reflections. Together, these quilts speak not  
only of altered perception, but also of its  
intensification and expansion.<sup>32</sup>





# PLATE 21

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, fern, and dot stitches

32 1/4 x 34 inches (83.2 x 86.4 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-694

The central lotus is so tightly quilted that it cannot lie flat and, by its dimensionality, becomes the primary element. The seemingly sedate composition abounds with surprises, such as the row of five disparate roundels at left punctuating the otherwise uniform blossom border. A conglomeration

of whimsical animals, including two tubular cats, intertwines with the scenes. Fanciful corner plants contrast with two realistic dark green palm trees floating in the field. At top is a multitiered *ratha* (processional chariot), while at bottom, Radha links hands with an adorably chubby indigo Krishna.





# PLATE 22

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, running, dot, eye, and arrowhead stitches

32 7/8 x 33 inches (81.9 x 83.8 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-11

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 221, cat. 444

Between the diamond-stemmed trees are four figural groups that Kramrisch labeled "satirical scenes." At bottom a man embraces a hookah-smoking woman on a fashionable armchair. His unfinished lower body is sketched onto the cloth. The scene at top may be the familiar parable of the blind men and the elephant, a story that originated in South Asia but had spread worldwide long before the nineteenth century. Even more enigmatic are the scenes at

left and right. The former shows four horsemen (the top of the fourth rider visible only in underdrawing) apparently battling a nest of cobras and, perhaps, the nearby crab as well. The latter depicts a pair of possibly bearded men, one of whom holds what appears to be a flower and a stalk of grain, the other what may be a stringed satchel or toddy pot, suggesting their possible identification as either religious mendicants or revelers.





# PLATE 23

Khulna District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton and silk  
embroidery in back, running, seed, buttonhole,  
dot, and darning stitches  
7 1/2 x 24 inches (19.1 x 61 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-683

Published: Kramrisch 1949, pp. 22–23, plates  
4 and 5; Cleveland Museum of Art 1953–54,  
p. 14, cat. 73; Kramrisch 1968, plate XXXIX  
and p. 117, cat. 416; Kramrisch 1983, p. 108,  
fig. 4.8 (detail); Blum 1998, p. 143, plate 261

To one side of the lotus on this delightful  
*arshilata*<sup>33</sup> three men stand with raised right

arms, two holding what are most likely  
stalks of grain. They are dressed formally, in  
short jackets, shoes, round-topped hats, and  
colored dhotis with decorative pleating.  
Across the central lotus from them stand  
four similarly posed women in variously pat-  
terned saris worn without blouses.<sup>34</sup> These  
figures may represent the dances performed

separately by groups of men and women at  
certain points in multiday wedding rituals,  
or similar “folk” dances that celebrate the  
agricultural year.<sup>35</sup> While the use of silk  
thread is rare in kanthas such as this one,  
made prior to the mid-twentieth century, it  
became quite common following the kantha  
revival in the late twentieth century.





# PLATE 24

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in buttonhole, darning, satin, dot, seed, and stem stitch shading stitches

35 x 32 inches (88.9 x 81.3 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-679

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XII; Kramrisch 1968, p. 118, cat. 421; Mode and Chandra 1985, p. 228, fig. 318

This embroiderer was an acute observer of the natural world who adapted her observations with unfettered imagination. Her array of bird species includes a green ring-necked parakeet (right), an owl (left), and a

golden pheasantlike bird (bottom) that may be a Himalayan monal. Equally charming is the mother sun bird in the tree at top right, gently feeding her offspring from her narrow, curved beak. Kramrisch wrote in depth on this complex kantha, linking its motifs to visually analogous ones found in early Indic religious art. Many of the details she used to forge these links (e.g., the pendent

red banana buds of the top left tree or the elaborate roundel above the horse at right) appear to be unique to this quilt, although they may also be seen as creative variations on common kantha motifs rather than as reflections of earlier but rarely seen forms, thus raising intriguing issues of artistic intention.<sup>36</sup>





# PLATE 25

Panjia, Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, chain, darning, outline, satin, split,  
fishbone, arrowhead, dot, eye, zig zag  
variation, and surface satin stitches  
76½ x 46 inches (194.3 x 116.8 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-673

Published: Kramrisch 1949, colorplate 8  
(detail) and p. 25, plate 7; Jayakar and Irwin  
1956, p. 59 (detail); Kramrisch 1968, p. 118,  
cat. 236; Blum 1997, p. 142, plate 258

The superb needlework of this truly *dorukha*  
(double-sided) rectangular kantha displays a  
range of stitches, including extensive use of  
the satin stitch, and glorious color. It is the  
only piece to which Kramrisch assigned both

a town and a district.<sup>37</sup> The detailed cos-  
tumes include typical round-brimmed men's  
hats and shawls, as well as the European  
shoes worn by wealthy Bengalis; some of  
the upper garments may reflect the cut of a  
European jacket.<sup>38</sup> Certainly the artist dis-  
played her erudition as well as her skill  
through details such as the English saddle  
and stirrup on one red horse.





# PLATE 26

Khulna District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin,  
 running, cross, eye, zig zag variation, zig zag  
 Bosnia variation, seed, fishbone, fern, and  
 stem stitch shading stitches  
 66½ x 45½ inches (168.6 x 115.6 cm)  
 Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-686

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XV<sub>3</sub> (detail);  
 Kramrisch 1949, pp. 20, 25; Jayakar and Irwin  
 1956 fronticepiece (detail); Kramrisch 1968,  
 pp. 116–17, cat. 415 (detail)

Pattern was paramount for this sophisti-  
 cated artist. A vibrant palette combines gen-  
 erous amounts of mustard and chartreuse  
 with red, black, blue, and other greens. The  
 interplay of abstracted motifs and geometric

panels—some bordered, others segregated  
 by carefully tailored forms—shows a cre-  
 ative eye, as does the extraordinary range of  
 stitch-types and the selective use of white-  
 on-white running stitches as a design ele-  
 ment. The elongated peacocks surrounding  
 the central lotus and the two *rathas* flanking  
 it, with their tiers of striped arches, privilege  
 graphic abstraction over legibility. The panel  
 directly above the left *ratha* contains four

striped triangles covered in leaf-shaped pro-  
 jections, perhaps a rendition of the simpler  
*alpana* motif of a rectangle with interior  
 cross that may also reflect the ornamented  
 rice mound (*shri*) that is an important item  
 in Bengali weddings.





# PLATE 27

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, darning, outline, running, eye, dot, and  
 double running stitches  
 61 x 44 1/4 inches (154.9 x 113.7 cm)  
 Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-17

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 119, cat. 434

Along the top and bottom of this quilt appear schematic renderings of the amorous *babu* with his *bibi*, seated under lamps with fans and hookahs. Their outline bodies, which Kramrisch called "foetus-like," have distinctive figure-eight-shaped torsos. This same body form can be seen beneath the clothing of the Bengali couple standing inside a house on the right. On the same side is another well-dressed Bengali couple beside a man in full European top hat and

tails. These three have delicate faces, detailed and naturalistically draping clothing, and bodies that bear little resemblance to those of the other figures on this quilt, implying a variety of visual referents. Corner "trees" have unusual espaliered branches ending in berrylike balls. The two creatures overshadowing a similar tree at the bottom resemble a popular Bengali variation of the goddess Durga's lion mount.





# PLATE 28

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, dot, double arrowhead, and eye stitches

23 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches (59.1 x 18.4 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-18

Published: Kramrisch 1968, cat. 418, p. 117 (detail)



# PLATE 29

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, eye, arrowhead, cross, and surface satin stitches

32 x 9 1/4 inches (81.3 x 23.5 cm)

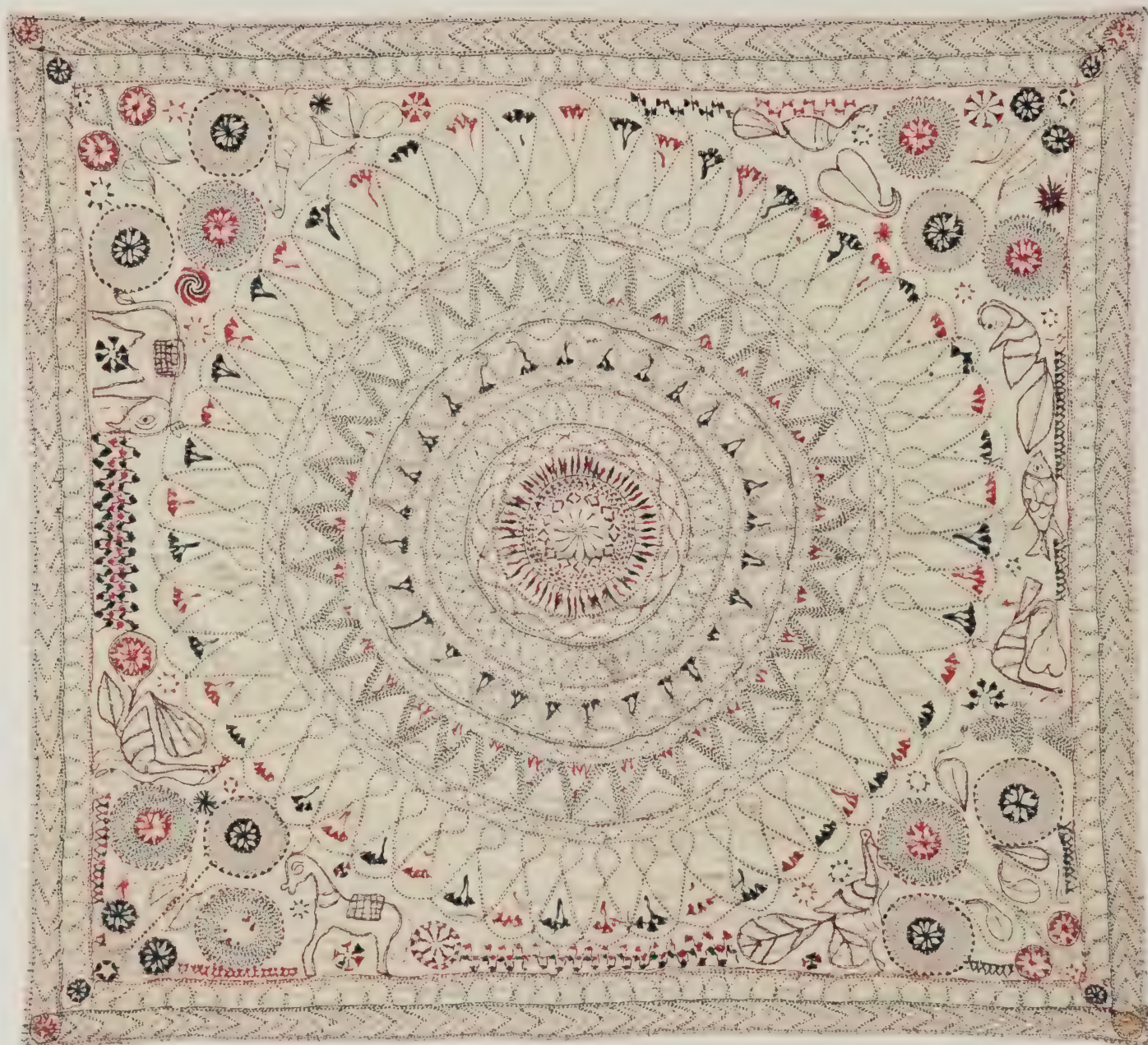
Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-4

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 29, plate 12; Kramrisch 1968, p. 117, cat. 420; Mode and Chandra 1985, p. 231, fig. 321 (detail)

These bicolor *arshilatas*,<sup>39</sup> although clearly made by different hands, are strikingly similar in motif and pattern. Each is bordered with alternating red and blue leaf sprigs with contrasting stem swags. Their principle motif is an elaborate *ratha*, with four and seven wheels, respectively. On each wheel balances a stick figure with upraised arms that resembles an auspicious emblem seen throughout the region.<sup>40</sup> Both *rathas* are topped with three chambers housing cross-

legged deities. The *ratha* in plate 29 also holds a large icon of a beak-nosed Krishna flanked by *gopis* with huge nose rings and voluminous hairdos; with its wheeled elephant at bottom and tall spires and flags projecting far above the arches, this motif nearly spans the height of the cloth. In contrast, the *ratha* in plate 28 is mirrored by a flowering tree, both set above identical trios of *kalkas*.





# PLATE 30

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, running, eye, star, and arrowhead stitches

31 1/4 x 34 1/4 inches (79.4 x 87 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-675

The majority of this square is taken up with a multiringed central lotus in which lines of running stitches in blue and taupe are enlivened by tufts of arrowhead stitches. In the narrow spaces between the corner trees, amid leaves, birds, pack animals, a fish, and a Shiva *linga*, appear various runs of untethered border motifs, as if the embroiderer

used the piece to practice her stitches. The actual border displays a chevron band and a loop pattern that echoes a similar form in several surrounds of the central lotus. The often empty ground remains unquilted.





# PLATE 31

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, satin, running, and dot stitches

36 x 36 inches (91.4 x 91.4 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-697

This kantha, with its primary motif of an elaborate nine-spired temple, has a single orientation. The bottom grid, filled with lotus roundels and floral trees, has triangles topping either end, indicating that it is the base level of the structure.<sup>41</sup> The next level displays four animals within a colonnade. The row above holds elephant-headed Ganesha (center left) and his brother, peacock-riding Karttikeya (center right), flanked by two male figures. The upper three chambers contain a

central Shiva *linga* and beak-nosed devotees. Despite the focus on Shiva, the large figures atop the roof may represent Radha and Krishna, who often appeared together in the upper sanctum of the region's brick temples, as they still do on *rathas*, although here their positions are reversed from the norm.<sup>42</sup> A few spots of ocher in this otherwise bicolor kantha echo the vivid woven border sewn around its edge.<sup>43</sup>





# PLATE 32

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin, split, and zig zag variation stitches

31 x 31 inches (78.7 x 78.7 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-701

Each of nearly identical corner trees is flanked by oversized *kalkas* that bracket central motifs. Clockwise from bottom these are a pair of flower-tailed peacocks (their feet whimsically reversed) sharing a snake, a four-wheeled *ratha* with hanging lamp in its upper chamber, an elephant, and a lamp-lit shrine enclosing a black Shiva *linga*. The *linga* is done in wide

*chatai*, or pattern darning, which gives it a striped effect and makes its form difficult to distinguish from a similarly stitched flower and other objects also within the shrine.

The embroiderer has used sari border patterns to create several of the rings within her striking black-and-red *satadalapadma* (hundred-petaled lotus), which here indeed has more than a hundred petals.<sup>44</sup>





### PLATE 33

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery  
in buttonhole, darning, outline, satin,  
running, seed, eye, fishbone, arrowhead,  
and zig zag stitches

35 1/2 x 34 inches (90.2 x 86.4 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-696

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XI, (detail)

Abutting the central lotus and filling a third of this unusual composition is a row of cusped arches each containing a flowering tree, a motif familiar from Mughal architecture and textiles.<sup>45</sup> The upper left quarter is taken up by a massive tree with a lobed trunk through which runs a strip of diamond border pattern. In the top right appears a bi-level *ratha* with what look like five *lingas* above and cor-

responding attendant-devotees in the lower tier. Feathery flags, like most of the foliage on this *kantha*, are done in the fishbone stitch favored by this artist. The charming outer border depicts round fish,<sup>46</sup> but, as with most of the stylized fauna and flora stitched onto *kanthas*, it is difficult to more than guess at the species.





# PLATE 34

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, buttonhole, darning, outline, running,  
 seed, stem stitch shading, surface satin, eye,  
 and fern stitches

38 1/2 x 37 inches (97.8 x 94 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-704

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XIV<sub>2</sub>

Two multitiered chariots with elaborate  
 trussed construction, each pulled by a single  
 horse, dominate the lower portion of this  
 finely stitched square *kantha*. A tiny Shiva  
*linga* visible in each of the upper chambers  
 indicates that these *rathas*, like the architec-  
 turally simpler one in plate 33, are taking  
 part in a religious procession.<sup>47</sup> Also in the  
 lower panel, two women flank a man inside

a triple arcade, its flat roof crowned by a  
 large square form. Nearby is a man dressed  
 in what is likely a nineteenth-century military  
 uniform, including boots, a short jacket, and  
 a cap.<sup>48</sup> The left square in the row at the top  
 carries a single man with conical hat, while  
 the far right square frames a fashionable  
 Calcutta couple.<sup>49</sup>





# PLATE 35

Undivided Bengal

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin, split, running, arrowhead, eye, zig zag with backstitch variation, and dot stitches

22 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches (57.2 x 21 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-709

This elaborate horse-drawn car may be a processional *ratha*, but the single occupant, shown in profile, suggests that it is meant to represent a war chariot of a mythological hero such as Rama. The popular block prints made in Battala near Calcutta during the nineteenth century often illustrate mythological battles such as those in the *Ramayana* with horse-drawn war chariots

depicted in very similar multitiered trussed form.<sup>50</sup> Traces of line drawing (probably in ink) visible beneath the embroidered images (e.g., the pillars and wheels of the *ratha*), as in a number of other pieces in these collections, demonstrate that embroiderers often drew their designs on the cloth prior to stitching.





# PLATE 36

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, split, running, seed, leaf, eye, and dot stitches

34 1/4 x 34 inches (87 x 86.4 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-9

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 120, cat. 441

The gridlike composition of this kantha, especially the squares each containing a single animal (clockwise from lower left they appear to be a donkey, dhole [wild dog], elephant, peacock, lion, crow, bull, boar, horse, and pair of elephants), is reminiscent of the molded terra-cotta blocks covering the region's brick temples and mosques, and even found in much earlier

Buddhist monuments. In their poses and upraised trunks, the elephant pair mimics the two that lustrate Gajalakshmi (elephant-Lakshmi), a common form of the goddess of prosperity.<sup>51</sup> The animal theme continues in a border motif of fish whose striped tails and cross-hatched bodies evoke fish-shaped metal containers made in the *dokra* (resin-thread) technique.<sup>52</sup>





**PLATE 37**  
 Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running,  
 arrowhead, dot, and fern stitches  
 30 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches (76.5 x 79.7 cm)  
 Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-5

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 28, plate 11;  
 Kramrisch 1968, p. 120, cat. 438 (detail);  
 Basak 2007, p. 84, plate 74 (detail)

In Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, as in the scenes on this kantha, the lives and emotions of Krishna and Radha merge with those of their devotees. In the bottom panel, groups of devotees dance ecstatically on a platform (right) and within an

arcaded, flat-roofed building (left). Most wave their right arms in the air, as do many of the devotees in the left panel who celebrate enshrined icons of Radha and Krishna, the latter identifiable by his peacock-feather crown. The *naukavilas* episode, with an adorable golden Radha, appears on the right. The dancing and fan-waving devotees who flank the boat in this scene indicate that the embroiderer is

depicting not only the story, but also its ritual reenactment. Narrative and ritual also combine in the top panel with (left to right) a *ratha*, enshrined icons of Radha and Krishna, an abbreviated version of the *vas-traharana* episode, and the divine couple dallying in a forest clearing.<sup>53</sup> Note also the detailed depictions of gold jewelry in the corners of the central square.





# PLATE 38

Undivided Bengal  
Nineteenth century

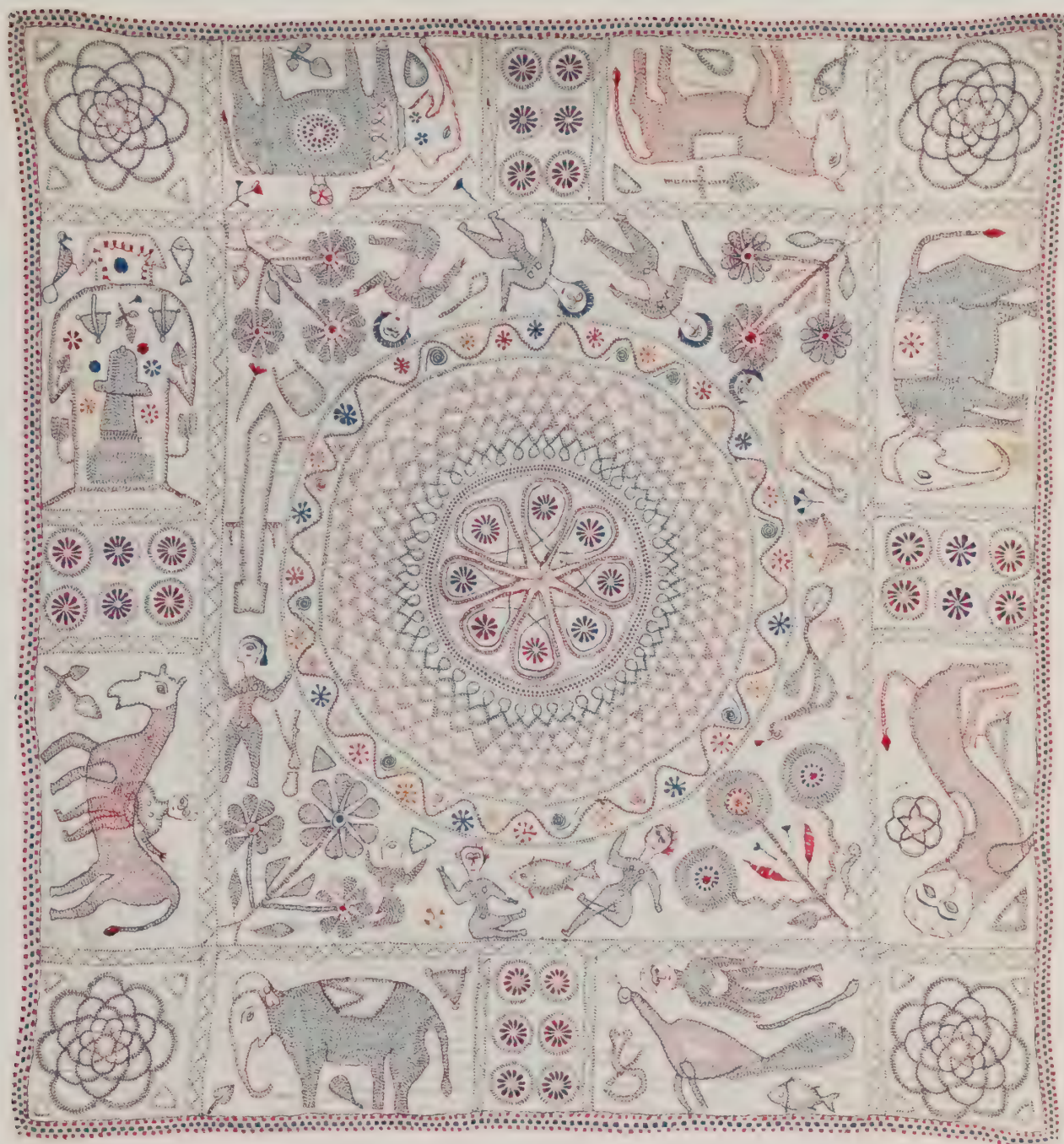
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, fern,  
and double running stitches  
31 x 31 inches (78.7 x 78.7 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-698

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XIII, (detail)

A grid of eight different, carefully orches-  
trated border patterns surrounds the cen-  
tral square, an abstractly geometric  
"thousand-petaled" lotus that is echoed by  
the tops of the trees in the corners and by  
the cardinal squares.<sup>54</sup> Elephants bearing  
two riders<sup>55</sup> and horsemen are placed sym-  
metrically in the intermediary blocks,

whose backgrounds are enlivened by tiny  
roundels. In three of the blocks with horses,  
these roundels alternate with golden ear-  
rings, nose rings, and forehead pendants to  
present a sampling of typical Bengali jew-  
elry. Similar jewelry rendered in even  
greater detail appears within the central  
square of plate 37.





# PLATE 39

Khulna District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, running, fern, dot, eye, and seed stitches

31 x 30 inches (78.7 x 76.2 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-681

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 19, plate 1; Jayakar and Irwin 1956, p. 62; Kramrisch 1968, plate XLII and p. 116, cat. 414; Kramrisch 1983, p. 109, fig. 4.10

The objects clustered at the upper left in the square around the central lotus are a *kula* (U-shaped rice-winnowing tray), a *dheki* (foot-pumped grain thresher, here

depicted from above), and what is likely a stalk of rice.<sup>56</sup> In rural Bengal, winnowing and threshing were most often women's work. The *kula* is one of the most common agricultural objects, and its auspiciousness gives it a major role in a host of Bengali rituals involving women as well as men, from rites to bring rain, to those surrounding marriage and children. In the border abut-

ting these objects, a large Shiva *linga* below hanging lamps is housed in a round-roofed, two-storied structure with overhanging eaves and sconces projecting at the sides. This shrine resembles the famous Shiva temple at Tarakeshwar near Calcutta, a major pilgrimage site for infertile women.<sup>57</sup>





#### PLATE 40

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, outline, running, zig zag variation, fern, and surface satin stitches  
35½ x 34½ inches (90.2 x 87.6 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-706

Published: Kramrisch 1949, p. 20, plate 2 (detail)

To the left of the central roundel of interlocking petaled hexagons<sup>58</sup> appears (upside down) a *ratha* bearing a man worshipping a Shiva *linga*. The *ratha* is pulled by a blue horse, tightly squeezed against the central lotus, which may or may not be in tandem with the similarly compressed red horse to the left. These malformed creatures contrast with the lithely leaping red horse in

the bottom quadrant. Two auspicious serpent circles,<sup>59</sup> each formed from a single snake, appear: one, stitched in blue thread, abuts the *ratha*, the other, in red, hovers above the leaping horse's back. Just in front of this horse hangs what appears to be a severed lion's head that resembles a finial (e.g., for a palanquin handle, cane, or piece of furniture).





# PLATE 41

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, split, running, zig zag variation, and dot stitches

25 1/4 x 25 1/2 inches (64.1 x 64.8 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-677

The central circle of interlocking petaled hexagons, general layout, and other motifs on this kantha echo those in plate 40. The prominent circular snake-band motif is juxtaposed with both a red horse and a man with raised right hand.<sup>60</sup> Other common details include the U-shaped branches of the corner trees and the flamelike projec-

tions rising between each border *kalka*. The embroiderer's fluid imagination is best demonstrated by the jaunty upright peacocks (lower right) that seem to discard their tails, heads, and legs in stages, as if themselves emulating the *kalkas*.





# PLATE 42

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, double back, darning, running, seed,  
arrowhead, brick, surface satin, and eye stitches  
78 x 55 1/4 inches (198.1 x 140.3 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-713

Published: Blum 1997, p. 142, cat. 259

This atypical quilt is subdivided into fifteen roughly equal squares, each filled with carefully varied geometric patterns in multi-colored running stitches, giving it a striking similarity to the interlocking fields and ponds of the Bengali landscape. Close examination of the neatly stitched ground reveals that the meticulous central lotus, corner florals, red fish with four-oared boat, and delicate floral scrolls in the square

above the boat, were all embroidered before their geometric backgrounds. In contrast, the black and red fish and the two moths were embroidered on top of the finished quilting, as were the various supplementary line and cross patterns. These overstitched motifs use different thread and are more roughly and loosely embroidered, implying not only two campaigns of work, but also two distinct hands.





### PLATE 43

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, darning, running, dot, double running,  
and seed stitches  
50 1/4 x 62 1/4 inches (127.6 x 158.1 cm)  
Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-682

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate X; Kramrisch  
1968, p. 119, cat. 432

Two elephants give this large kantha a decidedly horizontal orientation, despite nine symmetrically placed lotuses with birds and fish around them. Kramrisch speculated that the single elephant rider at top could be the god Indra (holding a whip and net)<sup>61</sup> or "the Spirit Rider," by which she meant a local agricultural deity.<sup>62</sup> The ancient Vedic storm deity Indra, king of the gods' heaven, was propitiated by Bengali women as

a bringer of rain with *alpanas* depicting his *vajra* (thunderbolt).<sup>63</sup> However, in stories and festivals, he was a minor figure, and not an active devotional focus. Alternately, the yellow-green stick in the rider's right hand might be interpreted as Krishna's flute and the unusual hat as his peacock-feather crown, a motif imagined by embroiderers in a variety of forms.





#### PLATE 44

Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal (SK)

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in chain, darning, split, running, single-sided, eye, arrowhead, zig zag variation, and brick stitches  
58 1/2 x 38 inches (148.6 x 96.5 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-678

Published: Kramrisch 1968, plate XLI (detail) and p. 120, cat. 442; Kramrisch 1983, p. 109, fig. 4.9 (detail)

The almost excessive use of loose black-and-red pattern darning with minimal outlining gives this kantha a pulsating vibrancy.<sup>64</sup> Two elephants, one carrying a howdah, the other sheltering a calf, raise curled trunks. Equally lively but far more

abstracted are two great peacocks, each constructed from discrete pattern-darned shapes whose striped effect disintegrates the birds' forms against the busy ground. Other motifs include a drawstring necklace (upper right) and a *janti* (areca nut cutter) and scissors (bottom center).<sup>65</sup> The stitches that connect the many pieces of the base cloth are readily visible, as are some carefully mended areas.





# PLATE 45

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Late nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 back, darning, outline, running, fishbone, and  
 surface satin stitches  
 75 x 48 1/4 inches (190.5 x 122.6 cm)  
 Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-1

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XI (detail);  
 Cleveland Museum of Art 1953-54, p. 14,  
 cat. 76; Kramrisch 1968, pp. 118-19,  
 cat. 428 (detail)

Concentric black and white circles on the  
 outer border of this kantha visually evoke  
 appliqué work in their boldness. Instead of  
 the usual radial composition, the narrow

central panel holds two flowering pome-  
 granate trees that rise to an equine center-  
 point. These trees demonstrate careful  
 observation of the plant in many stages of  
 maturation, including buds, flowers, and  
 several sizes and colors of fruit, the ripest  
 stitched in pure red. On one side of the trees  
 are six saddled elephants positioned trunk to  
 tail, each sniffing a red ball.<sup>66</sup> Opposite them,

six saddled horses stand nose to nose and  
 graze from several types of baskets. Kram-  
 risch linked these confronted horses to  
 images found in the first millennium B.C. and  
 earlier.<sup>67</sup> This particular embroiderer's love  
 of acute observation, however, suggests that  
 her model was far closer to home.





# PLATE 46

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
 Second half of the nineteenth century  
 Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
 buttonhole, darning, running, dot, eye, and  
 whipped running stitches  
 31 1/2 x 31 inches (79.7 x 78.7 cm)  
 Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-16

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 117, cat. 419

This square kantha is decidedly one-sided,  
 with little of the neatly pattern-darned  
 motifs appearing on the reverse. A close  
 look reveals numerous careful mends to  
 the background fabric in bright white  
 thread. Despite the two small birds in the  
 lower right, orderly vegetation dominates.  
 The inner border uses four different distinct

patterns, including a leaf-vine and a row of  
 four-petaled blossoms. Around this appear  
 a wide floral scroll, an elongated chevron,  
 and a double chain. The chevron motif is  
 called by terms such as "rice stalk" or  
 "date branch," showing that even geomet-  
 ric forms were conceived as abstracting the  
 natural world.<sup>68</sup>





#### PLATE 47

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, darning, outline, satin, eye,  
and dot stitches  
30 3/4 x 26 1/2 inches (76.8 x 67.3 cm)  
Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-2

Published: Kramrisch 1968, p. 118, cat. 430

Solidity and translucence are the themes of this kantha. The eight petals of the central lotus have solid red or blue centers surrounded by widely spaced dot stitching in the opposite color. This format is also used in other locations, including the crossed-leaf corner elements. Spiral pattern darning in alternating blue and red make other

petals in the outer ring of the lotus appear almost psychedelic. Peacocks with crescent-shaped heads and a few loose runs of border patterning complete the composition. The same distinctive stitching, play with color, and even peacock type appear on an *arshilata* in the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata. The Gurusaday piece, however, is

recorded as having been collected in Faridpur District, while Kramrisch records hers as coming from Jessore, thus demonstrating the difficulty of correlating a specific pre-partition district (e.g., region) with specific forms and techniques (e.g., style).<sup>69</sup>





# PLATE 48

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, eye, and zig zag variation stitches

23 1/2 x 6 inches (59.7 x 15.2 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-699

Although the thin cotton ground of this *arshilata* is damaged, the elegant red and indigo embroidery remains in excellent condition. The surface is surrounded by a chevron border and subdivided into five segments by other simple borders patterns. At center is an unusual configuration of two four-petaled "lotuses" in bold satin stitch. A

rhythmically diagonal flowering tree appears in each of the four panels flanking these lotuses; the two below each include a bird perched among their branches.





# PLATE 49

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Second half of the nineteenth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, darning, satin, running, single-sided,  
double running, and stem stitch filling stitches  
41 3/4 x 21 3/4 inches (106 x 55.2 cm)  
Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-3

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XIII<sub>2</sub> (drawn  
detail of center); Kramrisch 1968, p. 118,  
cat. 422

Kramrisch called this densely quilted rec-  
tangular kantha, fringed at the short ends,  
an *owar* (pillow cover, which is laid on top  
of the pillow rather than tailored to fit  
around it). It is one of a group closely

related in size, technique, color, and  
design.<sup>70</sup> The carefully executed diamond-  
based border is also used within the curv-  
ing outlines of mango-shaped corner *kalkas*,  
and even fills the stems of their lotus buds  
and other whimsical floral projections. At  
center is a bold roundel formed of many  
smaller interlocking hexagons, configured  
as six-petaled roundels, each petal shaped

like a long grain of rice. Encircling birds  
peck at these ricelike grains as if consuming  
the remains of ritual offerings. The motif is  
commonly found in *alpanas* and other  
ephemeral women's arts throughout the  
larger region, such as the ritual wall paint-  
ings done by women of the Mithila region  
of Bihar and neighboring Nepal.<sup>71</sup>





#### PLATE 50

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, running, double running, eye, button hole, split, and satin stitches

7 1/8 x 8 1/2 inches (20 x 21.6 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-702



#### PLATE 51

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, running, brick, dot, and double running stitches

15 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches (38.7 x 42.5 cm)

Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-708

These two small squares display not only a range of stitches, but also a variety of border patterns. The multitude of names used for different border patterns reflects the richness of regional variation, as well as the wonderful fluidity of the everyday arts. In general, however, terms for specific patterns tend to stem from the resemblance of

the predominate shapes to everyday objects. For example, the diamond shapes of the red border around the smaller square (plate 50) may be called a *chok* (eye) motif, or named after a mid-arm ornament, or be given terms related to *barfi* (a ubiquitous diamond-shaped sweet).<sup>72</sup>





## PLATE 52

Jessore District, Undivided Bengal (SK)  
Second half of the nineteenth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, chain, darning, satin,  
running, brick, eye, zig zag variation, and  
star stitches

74 1/2 x 53 inches (189.2 x 134.6 cm)

Gift of Stella Kramrisch, 1968-184-13

Inscribed on reverse: *shima ti khi ra dasu ndari  
debi* [Shrimati/Mrs. Khirada Sundaridevi]

Published: Kramrisch 1939, plate XV (detail),  
p. 64, plate XV; Kramrisch 1968, p. 118,  
cat. 424; Blum 1997, p. 143, cat. 260

This kantha is one of a group of closely  
related pieces attributed to members of a  
weaver's caste based primarily in the Jes-

sore District of Undivided Bengal.<sup>73</sup> The lines  
of repeat motifs and the use of striated col-  
ors call to mind the patterns of loom-woven  
cloth. The design here is not restricted by  
the warp and weft of an actual loom, how-  
ever, but freely tilts and turns the multicol-  
ored "woven" motifs as needed. The corner  
*kalkas* are embroidered in a very different  
manner from the rest of the surface and  
were clearly meant to resemble the embroi-

dered "Kashmir" shawls that likewise arose  
from a weaving tradition.<sup>74</sup> Unlike so-called  
*dorukha* kanthas, where the designs appear  
as mirror images on the reverse, only a few  
colored threads emerge on the reverse of  
this piece. It is on this relatively blank back  
of the cloth, however, that a woman's name  
is stitched, perhaps the embroiderer's, or  
perhaps a recipient's.<sup>75</sup>



## NOTES

1. The important inscriptions on this kantha are particularly difficult and parts remain problematic. Enormous thanks for their work of deciphering and translating go to Dr. Akimun Rahman, Independent University, Bangladesh; Niaz Zaman; and Pika Ghosh. Rahman and Zaman translate the initial line as "On this cloth I write the end, coming to the feet of the Lord, Kamala Basini, Dasi," while Ghosh gives a possible interpolation as "Draped in this embroidered prayer, Kamala places herself at the feet of Hari, as his servant." The final line of the long inscription is especially difficult to see; Rahman and Zaman read it as *shri shri radha krishna / brindabane sholo kala / korechhentahara* . . . , and interpolate this as "In Brindaban Radha and Krishna played the sixteen arts [i.e., achieved fulfillment]." 2. For an iconographic analysis of these scenes within the Gaudiya Vaishnava context, see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," this volume. 3. See Mason, "Background Texture," this volume. While Kramrisch did not record the circumstances of her acquisition of this piece, it relates closely in palette, technique, composition, and many details to a square kantha in the Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta, said to have been collected in Narail, Jessore District. In Undivided Bengal, Narail constituted the eastern portion of Jessore; today it lies within Khulna Division, Bangladesh. Especially telling on the Asutosh piece is the similarity of the *naukavilas* motif and, to a lesser extent, the *makhan chor* scene opposite it, as well as the corner *kadambas* and elements of the central roundel. This kantha, which is on permanent view at the Asutosh Museum, is published in black-and-white in Basak 2007, p. 281, no. 303; however, the relationship of color and treatment is only evident when it is viewed in person. The overlap of the images on this kantha to prints produced in Battala, North Calcutta, during the early nineteenth century also allows a relatively early dating (see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"). 4. In the black-and-white photograph Kramrisch published with her 1939 article, this piece appears to have been in significantly better condition. While she does not indicate a region of origin, a work in the collection of the Asutosh Museum with closely related motifs and drawing,

although not by the same hand, is recorded as coming from Amirpur in the Khulna District of Undivided Bengal. A detail of this piece is published in Sukla Das, *Fabric Art Heritage of India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1992), fig. 61. 5. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal." War chariots and processional chariots (*rathas*) seem to share the same form in kanthas, as they do in other contemporary images such as Battala prints. Here Rama rides a war chariot filled with Shiva *lingas*, and the composition borrows freely from but does not replicate a particular Battala print of a Ramayana battle, a copy of which is included in an album in the Herwitz Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (see Mason, "Background Texture"). 6. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"; and Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions,'" this volume. 7. Some variation of this seems to have been performed in late-nineteenth-century Calcutta. For a description and sketch of a Kalighat painting depicting the act, see W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Drawings from the Basant Kumar Birla Collection* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1962), plate 20. 8. In their manner of compartmentalization, lines of alternating blue and pink dots, and format of trees and *kalkas*, as well as certain other details, these two works parallel a piece in the collection of Amitendranath Tagore, Kolkata (see Basak 2007, p. 71, plate 52), which bears several inscriptions, and thus might provide a clue to the origins of the two Kramrisch pieces. Unfortunately, the inscriptions are illegible in Basak's photograph, but her caption reads "Dorokha Sujni made by Sonamani Dasya, Jessore. Collected by Abanindranath [sic] Tagore." Basak (p. 85) also describes a piece she says was found by Rabindranath Tagore and is now with his grandson Amitendranath, but her description sounds like it is referring to the same kantha as in the photograph. In the description of the latter, she states that the kantha was "made by Sonamani Dasya of Komarpur." Komarpur may be one of several villages of that name now within Khulna and Dhaka divisions, Bangladesh. Although this kantha is still with the Tagore family, its current installation makes a clearer photograph of the inscription impossible. This kantha also shows

that the embroiderer made extensive use of at least seven Battala prints, with (apparently) each stitched image the mirror of its printed form.

9. The man astride the large feline holding a flail-like object (center of left border) may represent one of the tiger-riding saints common to both Hindu and Muslim traditions in Bengal (see Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions'"; and plate 83). Kramrisch and others have identified the line of male figures holding sticklike objects (upper third of right border) as soldiers, but there are several other possibilities. This image may depict a kind of folk dance-cum-martial art done by groups of young men with *lathis* (staffs) during Muharram, the Muslim month of mourning. For the first part of the month leading up to the culminating procession, these groups would move from home to home performing in the courtyards. This martial art could also play a role in wedding celebrations. Another possibility, in light of the unusual truncated garment worn by the second figure from the bottom, is that they are itinerant holy men, either followers of Chaitanya (although they are not tonsured) or *bauls*—itinerant musicians (although they hold no instruments). Such intriguing scenes deserve further study, as does the general subject of representing local *pirs* (saints) and performers.

10. Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1999), p. 192, discusses the meaning of sheep in related Kalighat images and references a local legend in which women have the power to turn men into sheep.

11. The objects held by these elephant riders have been labeled umbrellas, presumably due to the ribs and curved handles (see Kramrisch 1989, p. 79; however, this description appears as part of a plate caption that was written by someone other than the author), but they do not resemble any of the common depictions of umbrellas found on kanthas. Round hand fans with handles, however, are and were known from across the region, with examples surviving in ivory as well as less precious materials.

12. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing," this volume; and plate 52.

13. While her pendant breasts are not visible here, it is likely this is Barai Buri, the widow who acted as go-between for

Krishna and Radha (see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"; and plates 1 and 2).

Dhamjia and Jain (or whoever wrote the captions that accompany the piece by Kramrisch in their volume) clearly had not seen this entire kantha, as they mistook a section of the boat for the *vastraharana*, apparently interpreting the long, striped skirt as a tree trunk and writing, "Instead of creating the tree in the corner, the form of Krishna represents the tree" (Kramrisch 1989, p. 81).

14. For Krishna-Kali, see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"; and plate 7. Between Kali and Ravana stands an elephant ridden by two (or perhaps three) men; a similar elephant with riders is depicted on the left. Kramrisch identified these figures as circus performers balancing on elephants with the help of umbrellas held overhead. Some of the objects held by these riders do resemble umbrellas with scalloped borders. The object held by the foremost rider on the left elephant, however, definitely shows the looped ends of a bow (like those held by Ravana's attackers and frequently seen in Battala prints). The bubblelike outline in front of this elephant is a tree (note the red horse tethered to its trunk), and a similar tree fronts the boat.

15. For a lucid explanation of this common technique, see Zaman 1993, pp. 47–50. While the design is reflected on the reverse, the embroiderer clearly has not labored for a precise mirror image, as in truly *dorukha* kanthas such as plates 4 and 5.

16. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal."

17. See plates 40, 41, 49.

18. See plates 6, 7, 15.

19. Basak 2007, p. 49, designates the pattern on the black border of this kantha "*kalka* and *chokh taga*" (paisley motif combined with eye-motif border). She states that "in local dialects the border is also known as *taga*" (p. 45).

20. Niaz Zaman reads the final name as "Bandyā" and interprets this as the name Bandyopadhyay (see Zaman, "Women's Voices / Women's Words in the Kantha," this volume); others are unsure of the letters following the initial "b," and a few of the other stitched letters are debatable. The poem itself has been translated with a variety of nuances (see Ghosh, "Rags to Riches"; Zaman, "Women's Voices"; and Kramrisch, "Kantha"); all, however, agree on its sense.



21. For *dokra* work, see fig. 1.18. The line of heads may be an unusual representation of Ravana (see plates 3 and 6), or it may be related to images of Dakshin Ray. See Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions.'" The heads also suggest the horizontal head motif found in weavings and other arts of the head-hunting Naga people to the east of modern Bangladesh.

22. See plate 79. It is unclear whether these figures also depict the dances once commonly performed by single-gender groups at Bengali weddings and other celebrations. The clothing styles are extremely difficult to date because various combinations of Western and local dress were long part of military garb. While hats and jackets over dhotis became popular everyday wear during the 1930s and 1940s even outside of urban areas, other aspects of this kantha indicate a considerably earlier date of production.

23. See also plate 63, which is dated 1928. Another kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka (see fig. 3.10), bears a stitched date of 1909. When Kramrisch first published her kantha in the journal *Marg*, she noted it as the only dated piece then known. Basak 2007, p. 68, plate 47, publishes a large rectangular kantha in the Calcutta Gallery of the Victoria Memorial, Kolkata, which she states bears an inscription (not visible) giving a date equivalent to 1891 as well as place of manufacture (Magura, Jessore).

24. For the Manasa tale and the integrated iconography of this kantha, see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal." The identification of the seated figure as Chand Sadagar is suggested by a square kantha in the Gurusaday Museum (GM 1585) collected in Khulna District of Undivided Bengal, which also presents the motif of the iron house as well as that of a similarly affluent seated male figure who not only is placed in close proximity to the house, but is himself being approached by a snake. See Asis K. Chakrabarti, *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (Kolkata: Gurusaday Museum, 2000), p. 169, plate 76.

25. Balarama is frequently paired with Krishna in Kalighat paintings and Battala prints. In Bengali images of the *dasa-vataras*, he is at times an avatar, usually placed between Rama and Krishna.

26. See especially Perveen Ahmad, *The Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha:*

*Bangladesh National Museum Collection* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997).

27. Although simplified in this embroidery, the ridged roof is a form often found on the terra-cotta temples of the region. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal."

28. See Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions.'"

29. See plates 40, 41, 49, as well as Kramrisch's discussion in "Kanthā," reproduced in this volume.

30. See Mason, "Background Texture."

31. The perimeter begins with narrow bands of various sedate border patterns, followed by a wide surround of a graceful three-leaf creeper. The wide innermost surround covers two sides with bold satin-stitched *kalkas* and two with the diagonal floral grid. Basak 2007, p. 48, labels a detail of the grid and creeper motifs on this kantha as "Taraphool Muchra Paar." The rendering of a number of motifs (e.g., floral trees) on this and plate 19 also appear in a third quilt apparently likewise collected in Faridpur District of Undivided Bengal. See Indian Institute of Art and Industry, *Craft Museum* (Calcutta: Gossain, 1959), p. 39, Textile 11.

32. While the makers of these two quilts may never be known, might we romantically speculate that they were one and the same, producing varied yet similar works of art much as Vincent van Gogh produced his *Starry Night over the Rhone* (Musée d'Orsay) and, only a few years later, his dramatically distinct yet intimately linked *Starry Night* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)? On these two kanthas, however, details such as the direction of stitching in the petals of the roselike flowers (those on plate 19 run across the petal, those on plate 20 run lengthwise) might indicate a less immediate connection.

33. See the text accompanying plate 72 for a discussion of this term.

34. While the absence of blouses might be thought to indicate an early dating, since it is often said that the wearing of tailored blouses and saris came into common practice under British rule, women continued and continue to dispense with the blouse in many contexts, and this feature appears in regional imagery into the present, although it is now primarily reserved for goddesses. However, the very fine detailing of the lotus and figures, as well as their relation to motifs found in works from the

mid-nineteenth century, indicate a date in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kramrisch, however, dated it to the early twentieth century, probably because of the unusual use of silk.

35. Kramrisch variously calls this "a harvest (?) dance" and "a ritual dance." See also plates 37, 79. There are some stylistically related kanthas in the Gurusaday Museum, including two *arshilatas*, one collected in Dhaka (GM 1483; see Chakrabarti, *Kantha*, p. 105, plate 12 and caption on p. 66).

36. See Mason, "Interwoven in the Pattern of Time," this volume; and Kramrisch 1939. For example, in the symmetrical banana tree in the upper left of this kantha, Kramrisch reads the outline of a cow's skull (the banana flowers as horns) and writes: "Such metamorphoses go on in this kantha; things are connected if their shapes are similar" (pp. 40–41).

37. In undivided Bengal, Panjia was located in the southernmost spur of Jessore District, which protruded into Khulna. For another kantha from Panjia, see Kramrisch 1968, p. 118, cat. 427. A kantha in the collection of the Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, West Bengal, displays a somewhat similar format, figures, and motifs, although utilizing much cruder parallel satin technique and a bright green aniline-dyed thread. Basak 2007, p. 233, plate 231, gives its place of origin as Tamluk (p. 33), probably the early trade center in what is now the East (Purba) Medinipur District of West Bengal.

38. Compare plate 75, which shows distinctive pantaloons familiar from sixteenth- to eighteenth-century images such as those on Portuguese export embroideries and brick temples. It is not clear that such early garb is represented here, even on the seated figure with checkered top. Kramrisch labeled the costumes as "of about the middle of the nineteenth century."

39. For a discussion of the term *arshilata*, see the text accompanying plate 72.

40. This stick figure is painted on waterpots for various *pujas* and was part of the vocabulary of *alpāna*. Today it is still seen painted in red on walls throughout the region as a blessing for shops and homes.

41. While the roundels could allow the structure to be read as a *ratha*, the turrets and trees indicate that it is intended as a standing shrine. For this temple type, see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal."

42. For Krishna and Radha in the top sanctum of Bengali brick temples, see Pika Ghosh, *Temples of Love* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005), p. 35ff.

43. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing."

44. For millennia, a hundred petals, or, more often, the abstractly high number of a thousand petals, has been used across South Asia to imply the idea of an infinitely expanding lotus, although seldom are a thousand or even a hundred petals actually depicted.

45. Kramrisch 1939, p. 152, writes that she believed this kantha to have been created as one of a pair, thus accounting for its lack of "the usual balance."

46. As freshwater fish are considered far more desirable than saltwater varieties for the table and for presentation at weddings and other auspicious occasions in Bengal, this round fish likely depicts the popular pomfret (*chandi*) rather than the *bothi*, a left-eyed flounder found in the Bay of Bengal.

47. The single figure shooting an arrow skyward in front of the chariot on the left opens the possibility that this scene represents an epic battle. See plate 11 and Mason, "Background Texture."

48. Although Krishna sometimes does appear flanked by *gopis* in the arcade of the *dalan* temple form (see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"), there is nothing to support such an identification here.

49. For this *babu-bibi* motif, see plate 5. While Kramrisch illustrated her 1939 article with a photograph of the reverse of this kantha, Virginia Whelan's analysis indicates that the embroiderer worked from the side illustrated here.

50. See Mason, "Background Texture."

51. In many nineteenth-century Bengali images, including Kalighat paintings, the elephants are in the upright position seen in this kantha. For Gajalakshmi, although with the elephants in an alternative standing position, see plate 62.

52. See Mason, "Background Texture."

53. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," for a discussion of Gaudiya Vaishnava ecstatic devotion.

54. In 1939 Kramrisch wrote that both this piece and plate 24 were "about a century old."

55. While elephants on these kanthas are seen to bear anywhere from one to three riders, two is standard. It likely represents



either the passenger and the mahout or the groom and his brother, depending on the circumstances.

56. See Mason, "Background Texture." *Kulas* for ritual use are often decorated with *alpana*-like auspicious motifs such as lotuses, fish, birds, and butterflies. The *dheki* is a large, tapering wooden board mounted on two legs near the center, with one pointed and one squared end. A pestle is attached to the underside of the pointed end (here seen as the small circle and projection to the right). Stepping onto the end opposite the pestle creates a seesaw action that thumps the pestle into the grain.

57. For this identification, see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal." Kramrisch 1949, p. 19, described this kantha as "an 'archaic' type" due to the depiction of the human torso as "a rectangular connection between the limbs," writing that "its actual date would be about 1800 A.D.," the earliest date she assigns any kantha in her collection. However, she does not specify the works on which she bases this formal comparison.

58. Kramrisch 1949, p. 20, dated this kantha as nineteenth–twentieth century. For the motif of interlocking hexagons, see plates 41, 49.

59. This motif, which Kramrisch termed *sarpabandha* (Sanskrit for "snake-band"), is commonly found in *alpanas* and on Krishnalila *patas* (narrative scrolls illustrating the early life of Krishna). In the latter, the young Krishna dances in the center of the knot to represent his youthful feat of quelling the great serpent Kaliya. While snakes play a major role in pan-Indic narratives and are propitiated across the subcontinent, they are particularly significant in the wet climate of low-lying Bengal, as the worship of the goddess Manasa demonstrates (see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"). For the snake-knot motif, see also plates 8, 41.

60. Compare the very similar motif in plate 8, though the bushy-haired man here holds a rod in his left hand and stands to the left of the snake-knot. For the hexagonal lotus, see also plate 49.

61. Kramrisch 1939, p. 159. Indra rides the elephant Airavata. Kramrisch interpreted a number of elephant-riders as Indra, including a figure of Krishna atop an elephant composed of *gopis* (see plate 4).

62. For her discussion of the Spirit Rider motif, a heading under which she included an array of types from across the subcontinent (from *dokra* metal figurines to unbaked clay votive horses, such as in fig. 1.4), see Kramrisch 1968, pp. 52–56; and Kramrisch 1983, pp. 89–94.

63. For an example of an *alpana* to Indra, see Tapanmohan Chatterji, *Alpona: Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1948), pp. 56–57: "The *Vajra* is executed on the wooden seat of the god and it often represents the god himself. It is shown here in the form of a cross with heads looking like buds of lotus. Each bud has a butterfly at its head and a crab and conch shell on both sides. In between the buds are figures of fish. On the left side, below the fish, is an incense-burner." Chatterji (following Tagore) also identifies Indra as a stick figure with wild hair in an *alpana* for Tara *brata* (ibid., pp. 58–59; the images are reproduced from Abanindranath Tagore, *Banglar Brata* [Calcutta, 1919], who also gives other examples of Indra *alpanas*).

64. Although kanthas with pattern-darned motifs and a black-and-red palette are not uncommon, most either outline the figures more completely or keep the pattern darning tighter and the motifs less compressed. For a piece from the Akshoy Kumar Maitreya and Raja Rajaram Collection of North Bengal University, Silguri, that is intriguingly similar to this one in its open stitching and lack of outlines, see Basak 2007, p. 128, plate 132. Basak writes that this kantha comes from Dinajpur in northern Bangladesh, and that it was made by "a woman of the Oraon tribe."

65. See Zaman, "Women's Words," for a discussion of scissors. A kantha in the Gurusaday Museum (GM 1573) likewise pairs the scissors with a *janti*. See Chakrabarti, *Kantha*, p. 100, plate 7.

66. While the red balls reflect the shape and color of the pomegranates, they might represent the balls of grain and jaggery (palm sugar) often fed to elephants across South Asia.

67. The conical baskets at either end of this kantha, however, accurately depict a basket form used for livestock in nineteenth-century Bengal.

68. See Zaman 2007, p. 95. For the shared vocabulary of *alpanas* and kanthas, especially border motifs, see Tagore, *Banglar Brata*; for a related English-language work, see Chatterji, *Alpona*, which discusses, for example, the many implements (e.g., *chimte*, *khunti*) that can also form the basis for motifs and border names on *alpanas*.

69. For the Gurusaday piece (GM 1607), see Gurusaday Museum 2008, p. 28, where it is dated to the nineteenth century. Kramrisch herself is seen to struggle with the dating of this piece, as a note on the back of her working photograph used in the preparation of the *Unknown India* catalogue indicates that she had at first dated it to the second half of the nineteenth century but finally published it as "late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries."

70. Both the region and the size/use terms by which these pieces are published differ. For example, one in the Gurusaday Museum (GM 1530) measuring 34 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 22 inches (88 x 55.8 cm) is titled "Beyton, Jessore, nineteenth century" (see Gurusaday Museum 2008, p. 17), while another very similar in size (31 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches [81 x 55 cm]) in the Bangladesh National Museum (67.473) is called "Asan/Ashon, Khulna, c. 1915" (Ahmad, *Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha*, p. 46 and plate 56). Only traces of the bold embroidered design appear on the reverse.

71. See also plates 40, 41.

72. See Zaman 1993, p. 96; and Chatterji, *Alpona*, p. 36 and p. 29, no. 12. Likewise, the multiple diamond shapes in the lower and upper red borders of the larger square (plate 51) may carry some of these names. Basak 2007, p. 50, even labels a pattern very similar to the lower one on this kan-

tha as "Ganga-Jamuna paar," after the subcontinent's two major rivers, the Ganges and the Jamuna (her example differs only in the use of four rather than three parallel lines between the double diamonds).

Ganga-Jamuna is also the term employed to describe sari borders that are woven in a different color at the bottom from that along the upper length of the fabric.

73. Kramrisch 1939, p. 165, terms this group *Yugi* caste. François Balthazar Solvyns (1760–1824), who lived in Calcutta from 1791 to 1803, illustrates a "*joogee*" weaver, a group said to have been cloth merchants originally, but "now" the men who wove coarse cloth and women who spun fine cotton thread. See Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns and the European Image of India, 1760–1824* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press and the University of Texas Center for Asian Studies, 2004), pp. 177–78. Gurusaday Dutt (*Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* [Calcutta: Seagull, 1990], p. 107) states that the weaver's caste responsible for these kanthas is based in Jessore District, but does not name them. Chakrabarti (*Kantha*, p. 47) expands their range to include Khulna. A number of stylistically related pieces with provenance information are in the collections of the Asutosh and Gurusaday museums. Most were collected in Jessore District, with the rest from Khulna. One of the Khulna pieces has a very similar selection of motifs, including a bands of horses, multi-colored men, hearts, and crows (GM 1445; see Gurusaday Museum 2008, p. 6).

74. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing."

75. Kramrisch 1939, p. 164, transliterates the inscription as "Sim Tikhir Dāsundari Devī." All other inscriptions on the works in these collections are stitched on the obverse.



## Abbreviations

### Basak 2007

Sila Basak, *Nakshi Kantha of Bengal*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House (English translation of Bengali version published in 2002).

### Blum 1997

Dilys Blum, *The Fine Art of Textiles: The Collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

### Cleveland Museum of Art 1953-54

*Indian Painting and Folk Art, XVII Century-XX Century*. Exhibition catalogue. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art.

### Jayakar and Irwin 1956

Pupil Jayakar and John Irwin, *Textiles and Ornaments of India*. Edited and with a foreword by Monroe Wheeler. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

### Kramrisch 1939

Stella Kramrisch, "Kanthā." *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7, pp. 141-67 (reprinted in this volume).

### Kramrisch 1949

Stella Kramrisch, "Kanthas of Bengal." *Marg* 3, no. 2, pp. 18-29, 37.

### Kramrisch 1968

Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*. Exhibition catalogue. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

### Kramrisch 1983

Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*. Edited by Barbara Stoler Miller. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

### Kramrisch 1989

Stella Kramrisch, "Kantha Textiles." In *Handwoven Fabrics of India*. Edited by Jasleen Dhamija and Jyotindra Jain. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, Ltd.

### Mode and Chandra 1985

Heinz Mode and Subodh Chandra, *Indian Folk Art*. Bombay: Taraporevala.

### Zaman 1993

Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, 2d rev. ed. Dhaka: The University Press, Ltd.







THE JILL AND SHELDON BONOVITZ COLLECTION





## Resonances: A Discussion on Collecting with Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz

DARIELLE MASON

"It resonates with us" is a phrase Sheldon Bonovitz often uses to describe what he and his wife Jill have found compelling, from works of art to ideas. The phrase also well describes the couple themselves. Their shared passions, including collecting and promoting the works of many American self-taught artists, are amplified by the interplay of their seemingly incongruent vocations and personalities.

Sheldon was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1937. Growing up he worked in his family's wholesale fish business, held a variety of odd jobs, and, in his own words, lived "at the edge." Yet these experiences ignited his passionate conviction that society's divisions do not delimit human creativity and individual potential. Sheldon first came to Philadelphia to attend the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, receiving an undergraduate degree in 1959 followed by a degree from Harvard Law School in 1962. After a judicial clerkship in Washington, DC, he returned to Philadelphia in 1964 to join Duane Morris, a Quaker law firm with a strong social conscience that well matched with his own beliefs. In 1967 Shel-

don married Jill Fleisher and the couple soon had two sons. Sheldon practiced law at Duane Morris throughout his career. In 1998 he became the firm's chairman and chief executive officer. During the ten years that followed, he created and implemented an innovative business model that tripled the firm's lawyer force and increased its revenue five-fold. Sheldon, like many of the self-taught artists whose works now line the Duane Morris offices, has often been called a visionary by his peers. Sheldon serves on the boards of a number of not-for-profit and for-profit organizations. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and, most recently, in 2009, at the Harvard Law School.

Jill grew up in Philadelphia, where her mother, Janet Fleisher, owned a premier contemporary art gallery. Although exposed to the visual arts as a child, Jill chose to study psychology at Columbia University. After receiving a bachelor's degree there, she continued at Columbia Teacher's College while teaching children with special emotional needs in New York. During this time she met Sheldon and, after the younger of their two sons was in school, she returned to the arts, earning a degree in ceramics at Moore College of Art and Design. In 1974 Jill co-founded The Clay Studio, an institution that has become a vital and material center for the ceramic arts and played a key role in promoting the medium and the work of emerging artists worldwide. Jill is today an internationally acclaimed ceramic artist, her work residing in private and public collections including the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Her delicately potted, irregular and animated porcelain vessels explore the intersections of line and form, solidity and translucence, aestheticism and functionality. Recently she has pushed these seeming contradictions even fur-

Fig. 8.1. Sheldon and Jill Bonovitz in their living room, surrounded by pieces from their collection. Photograph by Graydon Wood



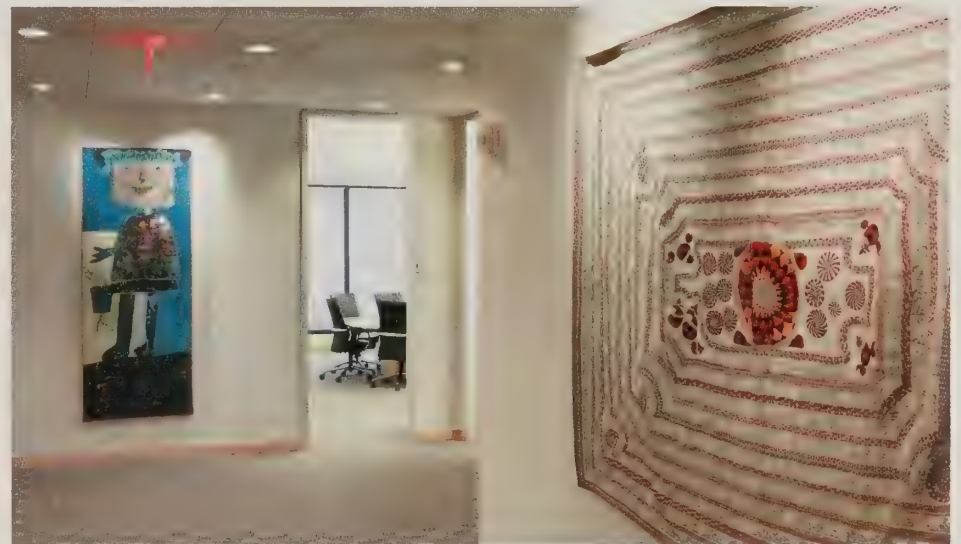
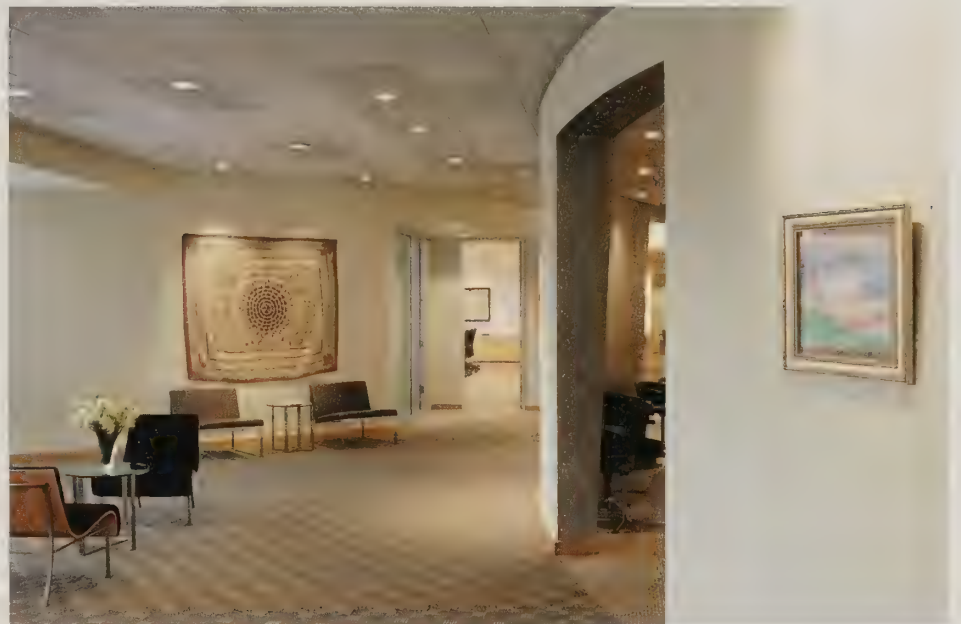


ther through a series of nonfunctional vessel forms made of wire and other materials.

Jill and Sheldon's joint effort to extend the reach and scope of the visual arts has also resonated with the mission of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, on whose Board of Trustees Sheldon serves. The Bonovitzes played a crucial role in realizing the Museum's 2008 exhibition *James Castle: A Retrospective*—the first comprehensive exploration of this powerful and enigmatic self-taught artist. As is clear from their own words below, resonance was also key to Jill and Sheldon's initial interest in kanthas. The quirky, imaginative quality that many figural kanthas share with much American self-taught art first caught their interest. As the collection grew, they came to recognize the uniquely personal power of these women's creations and to believe that kanthas, like American self-taught art, deserved serious exploration and wider exposure.

The following is a transcript of a discussion I had with Jill and Sheldon the morning of September 17, 2008, in the conference room outside of Sheldon's office at Duane Morris in Philadelphia, where he has now resumed his law practice, serving as the firm's Chairman Emeritus. I have edited and somewhat reorganized it for clarity, but it very much represents their own words and conveys their individual tones and personalities.

Jill exudes an ethereality, wonderfully tempered by the contemplative candor of her speech, each phrase seeming to blossom forth, freshly thought. In contrast, Sheldon is pent energy and staccato sentences, broken by sudden stillness as he listens with almost feline focus. They sit across from me—he in shirtsleeves and his ubiquitous abstract-patterned bowtie; she in an understatedly elegant black suit and handcrafted gold earrings (purchased, she tells me from a street vendor)—in front of an unbroken view of downtown Philadelphia through a wall-sized window. But even this impressive vista seems diminished to gray by an abutting conglomeration of glittering beads, plastic toys, and bright acrylic paint by visionary artist Simon Sparrow (1925–2000), as well as the other works of American self-taught art that fill the space. The art flows outward into the firm's nautiluslike corridors. Paintings of startling boldness



and intense color alternate with the aged and puckered kanthas, bringing imagination and humanity to the stark, modernist curves (figs. 8.2, 8.3).

**Darielle Mason:** I want to get a sense from you both not only about how you collected the kanthas, but also about your whole relationship with art, including but not limited to the American self-taught material that constitutes your primary collecting interest.

Figs. 8.2, 8.3. Kanthas and paintings by self-taught artists adorn the walls of the Duane Morris LLP offices, Philadelphia. Photographs by Graydon Wood



First, though, tell me something of your individual backgrounds and what led you to begin collecting.

**Sheldon Bonovitz:** I grew up with virtually no art in my home. I first came in contact with art when I was in college, where I took some fine arts courses. But my interest was probably more academic or intellectual than emotional. I remember being very interested, for example, in Surrealism and in the messages that the artists were communicating through their art. I looked at art through ideas rather than emotions or techniques, but I did have an interest.

Jill, on the other hand, grew up with art. Her mother was an art dealer and had one of the leading galleries in Philadelphia, the Janet Fleisher Gallery. Janet was one of the pioneer women owners of an art gallery, very much immersed in the art world, and she had a very good eye. She had started the gallery in Philadelphia in the early 1950s, and a little later opened a gallery in Paris called Galerie Philadelphie. Janet bought art from Picasso and Calder. Jill's home was full of great art: Picasso, Modigliani, Dubuffet, and the Philadelphia artist Arthur Carles. Janet related to us her experience with Joseph Beuys, who begged her to buy art from him; she took Roberto Matta and his family out to dinner because he had no money. Once while Jill's mother was on one of her trips to Europe, she contacted Jill, who was at Columbia University at the time, and said "Jill, there's this artist everyone in Europe is talking about but he doesn't sell in galleries—would you please go to his home and buy a piece of art from him?" Jill went to his house and spent a day with Joseph Cornell, and bought a beautiful box for Janet. So Jill grew up with art, and her experience was more on the emotive side; she developed a feel for it through her experiences as a child on up. After we were married, on April 15, 1967, we started buying art with the little funds we had. Janet also gave us some pieces, but it was still on a very modest level. In the early 1970s, Janet began to show self-taught material. We have one piece, a Sister Gertrude Morgan [1900–1980], which I think was in a show at her gallery in 1972. In 1976 she had a show of Howard Finster's [1916–2001] work, but it didn't sell and I think she bought the whole show. So we were introduced to self-taught art

through Janet and we modestly acquired it, but we weren't really focusing on any one genre of art. That changed in 1983, when we saw the Black Folk Art show at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. The show really resonated with us. The art was powerful and we said, "Gee, this is something we both really like." And we started to buy it.

**Jill Bonovitz:** At first it was more to have something on the walls in our house.

**SB:** But then, sometime in the early 1990s, people began to refer to us as having a collection of self-taught material. We talked about it, and we said, "You know, we really do have a collection." It was modest, maybe only twenty or thirty pieces, but people really weren't collecting it then, so we made the decision to focus on this area. One of the earliest pieces we bought was *The Yaekle Building* by William Hawkins [1895–1990; fig. 8.4]. It was just hanging high on the wall in a shop that sold outsider art, folk art, antiques, and I just said, "Gee, I like that" . . . and we bought it. We later bought a group of works by William Edmonson [1874–1951] from his family. We started buying other works that resonated with us—Bill Traylor [1856–1948; fig. 8.5], Martin Ramírez [1895–1963], Sister Gertrude Morgan [1900–1980]. And by the way, Jill and I always agree on our purchases, each one of us has the right of veto.

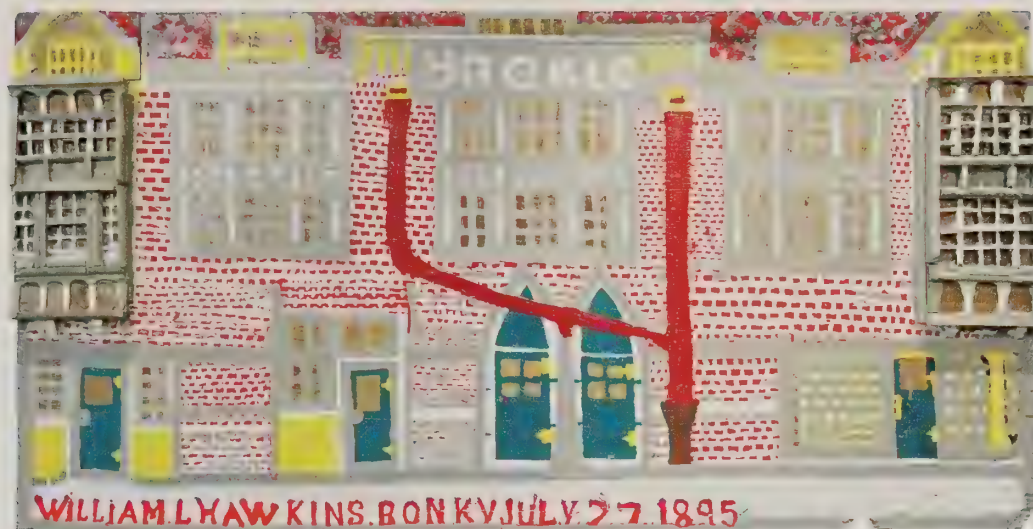
**JB:** But each of us also has a secret stash. Sheldon can put something in his office, and we don't have to agree on that. I have a little sewing room where I have a couple of pieces that Sheldon doesn't like. But anything in our house we have to agree on. We disagree on very few artists.

**SB:** Jill doesn't mind our buying and she likes living with the art when we own it, but she's not driven to buy like I am. I like buying and I also like the art of the deal—it's fun and it's part of what I do as a lawyer.

**DM:** So you like the deal more than the chase?

**JB:** I don't think we do the chase. We don't have a list of things that we want. It's just spontaneous.





**SB:** And things have come up in very odd ways. I'll give you one example. I was working on a case, probably the most difficult case I've had in my life as a lawyer. I was in New York living at the Four Seasons Hotel when it first opened. I was there for about forty-five days, in a complete tizzy, when a Chicago dealer sent me a Polaroid of a Ramírez. I could hardly make head or tails of the photo, but she said, "You've gotta buy this!" I said, "Call me when I'm through with this case!" But she kept badgering me, every day for six or seven days, saying we had to do it now. Finally, almost out of frustration, I said yes—and what I bought is the beautiful Ramírez *Dragon Train* [fig. 8.6] that now hangs in our living room. So our collecting is all reactive, reactive to opportunity. In another instance we saw a work we liked by a contemporary artist named James Brown at a show. We didn't buy it and I really regretted missing it, it sort of hung with me, no pun intended. Some years later we were at a party and I saw the very same painting on the wall of our host's home. I mentioned this to an art dealer who was at the party, telling him how much I regretted not buying it, and he said, "Guess what? I still represent the owner of

that painting. It's only on loan to this person because he has one of his works away on exhibition." So I bought it, and it's the Christ figure on cardboard you first see when you walk into our house. So our buying has generally been reactive to being brought something or seeing something.

**JB:** We don't play fill-in and we don't say, "We have to have a great . . . whatever." We're not list people. But I want to emphasize here that Sheldon really is the collector of the two of us. Sheldon is the one who has that collector "thing," where he sees something and he has to have it. He loves going out and looking at work, and in the back of his mind is that, if he sees something he loves, he'll want it. Whereas I come at it from a different direction—I love the art, and I love the works that we have, but I don't have that "having to need it" part.

**DM:** Do you think that's because you yourself are an artist?

**JB:** I do think that's why, because I'm making art and it fills that part for me.

Fig. 8.4. William Hawkins (American, 1895–1990), *The Yaekle Building*. Enamel on wood, 33 x 70 inches (83.8 x 177.8 cm). Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz

Fig. 8.5. Bill Traylor (American, 1856–1949), *Untitled (House with Multiple Figures)*, 1939–40. Graphite on cardboard; sheet 21 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches (55.7 x 36.7 cm) Philadelphia Museum of Art. Partial and promised gift of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz, 2002-50-1



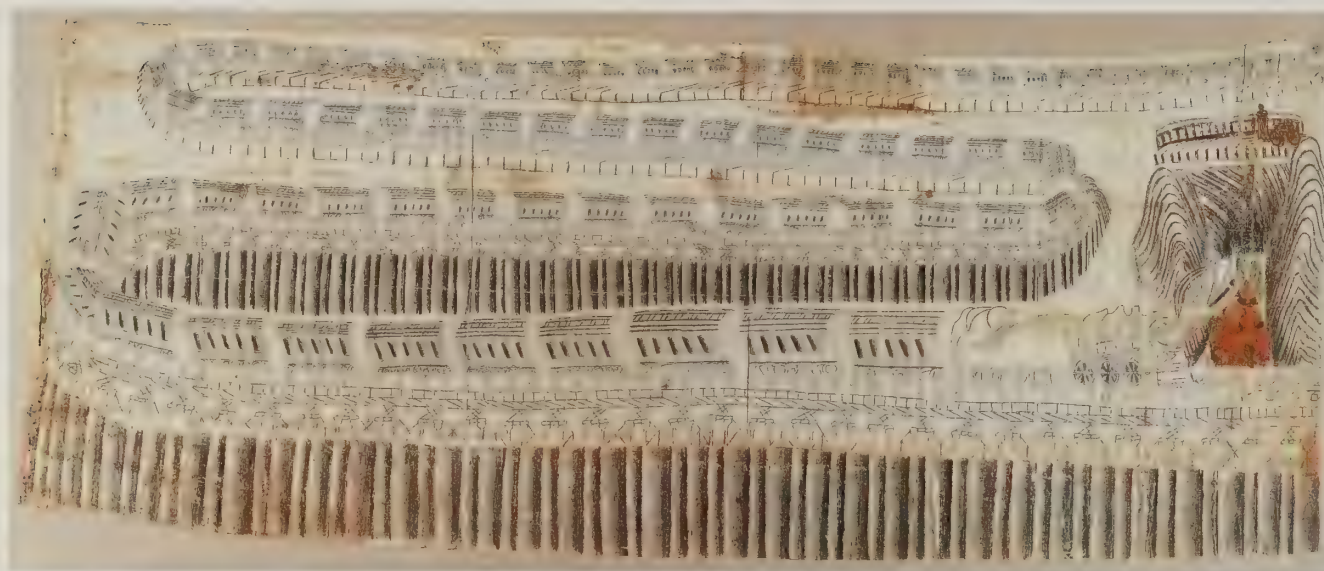


Fig. 8.6. Martin Ramírez (American, born Mexico, 1895–1963), *Untitled (Dragon Train)*, c. 1950s. Colored pencil, crayon, ink, and collage on paper; 32½ × 85½ inches (82.6 × 217.2 cm). Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz. Photograph courtesy Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia

**DM:** How do you relate your art making to your taste in art?

**JB:** Consciously I don't know. But I do think that unconsciously being surrounded by all this work definitely influences my art. I'm looking at it all the time and living with it and then, when I'm in the studio, I'm not thinking back to that art consciously but it's in me somewhere, and I know that it comes out in my work.

**DM:** Can you articulate what characteristics in self-taught art particularly appeal to you?

**JB:** In most of the self-taught art what appeals to me is the joyfulness, the very bright colors, plus it's not minimal. In a way that's strange, because what I'm drawn towards in all my own work is the minimal, trying to get something across with the least amount of whatever possible, like in a line drawing on a porcelain plate, it's very minimal. And that is the opposite of most of the self-taught work we collect. For example, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's [1910–1983] work is very elaborate, and in Ramírez's every inch is taken up. I'm not sure why those aspects, that are so opposite to my art, appeal to me, but they do. When I first started out, the thing that really got me into ceramics was when we went out

West and we saw the petroglyphs and the cave paintings in New Mexico.

**DM:** What had you been doing before that?

**JB:** Before we were married, I was teaching children with special needs. I had majored in psychology and minored in art. Then after we got married and had children I went to Moore College of Art and got enough credits to go to graduate school in art. But instead I started The Clay Studio here in Philadelphia, with four other people from Moore—you could say that was my graduate school. Around that time we were traveling in the Southwest a lot. The petroglyphs—their directness, authenticity, and minimalism—really inspired me, also the cave paintings in New Mexico. Seeing the Native American pottery in that region, and how it was made, was especially interesting to me—I even tried making my pottery that way, using a coil to build a pot and Raku firing to imitate dung firing. In fact, that was the thing that really got me into ceramics. My own work started off reflecting what I saw in the Southwest, and since then it's evolved in other directions, but that's how it began.

**DM:** Did your experience teaching special needs children have anything to do with your later attraction to the self-taught work?



**JB:** I don't know. I did save some of their drawings and they are powerful, emotional. We hung some in our house. After I was working in clay, I taught ceramics at Germantown Friends School. There too I used to bring home some of the pieces that the kids didn't want, and I still have some. If you look at all the work I've brought home from the various kids I've taught, and look at the work I've made myself, I think you find that it does relate to the self-taught material. All are spontaneous, responding to the moment and the materials, but also made with thought and past experience. I was just looking at one student's piece I've kept, a three-tiered little dish; the student probably just sat down with a ball of clay and started pinching around. I have no recollection of which student made it, but I still have it on my desk. I keep it next to a Native American pot.

**DM:** Is it the immediacy that appeals to you?

**JB:** Yes, it is the immediacy. . . . I think that's a very good word. My own work is about authenticity, intuition, and trust in the uncertainty of the process. It also grows from my past and is influenced by all my experiences. When I was making porcelain vases, I did them in a series, then I got involved in making other work, but when I went back to making vases, I used the earlier ones as a reference, a starting point. The past gives me ideas. Ten years ago I started working in wire, but off the vessel form. First they went on the table, and then I got a commission for works on the wall and had to go into new places, a whole new experience. Right now, I'm working on bowls and in a period of experimenting, the time in an artist's life when you are in between the idea and where you want to take it. I'm always open to ideas. I'll see, hear, read something that will spark me to move forward. And that's why being surrounded all the time by this art, I never know what's going to come out in my work. It's a process, conscious and unconscious, of being present in the world.

**SB:** And you would not describe your work as polished, would you? Jill's pieces are hand built, they are not symmetrical, they are not perfection—in fact, they are something other than perfection, because if

you wanted perfection you would have it manufactured. Both of us just love ceramics in general, and we respond to all kinds. Jill's mother bought a large quantity of Pre-Columbian pottery—all acquired well before 1969—and we have some in our house and really relate to it. We go to ceramic shows and galleries and have bought some contemporary ceramics. And a lot of our self-taught pieces are ceramic. For example, when Von Bruenchenhein died, he left a houseful of art that he had amassed during his lifetime. He never sold any of his works, and there were photographs, paintings, and ceramics. Since he was a baker I guess he fired them in the oven.

**JB:** Yes, he baked them in the oven and then spray-painted them.

**SB:** The dealer representing him put together a great installation of his ceramics, but we were the only ones interested. I remember the dealer asking "Am I

Fig. 8.7. Jill Bonovitz at home with examples of her own ceramics and a wire vessel (middle shelves), as well as ceramics by Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (top and bottom shelves). Photograph by Graydon Wood







Fig. 8.8. James Castle (American, 1899–1977), *Blue-Handled Pitcher*. Construction of thin gray/tan cardboard, with string, blue and white washes, yellow, red, magenta, green, and brown wax crayon, traces of graphite; 11 x 6 inches (27.9 x 15.2 cm). Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz

crazy? Is this really great art?" And we said, "Yes, it's great." And we bought the whole collection. (We've actually given many of those pieces to museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) I think I have a sophisticated taste in ceramics now from just seeing so many over the years. I realized that taste is developed only by seeing.

**JB:** That's true about all art.

**SB:** Yes, including self-taught art. In fact, our collection is not like a good "curatorial" collection of self-taught material. It's not so broad; it's more personal. There are some major figures we just don't collect. The best example would be Henry Darger [1892–1973]. And we've also gone deeply into artists who are not considered as "important" in the field. For example, both Jill and I love Jon Serl [1894–1993], but he's not number one in anybody's books. With some artists—like Traylor, Ramírez, or Edmondson—

we like all of their work in varying degrees. With some others, like Hawkins, we really only like some of the work, but those pieces are fabulous. We both also love contemporary art other than self-taught. In fact, when we go to museums and galleries it's usually to see contemporary art, and we do own some contemporary art which certainly relates to the self-taught material.

**DM:** Recently you took it a step further with the Foundation for Self-Taught American Artists. What was your intention in starting the Foundation?

**JB:** Well, it was a little bit different than in the collecting. We love film and often go to film festivals. At the time when documentaries were just getting popular, I had the idea that it would be really wonderful to make a documentary film. I realized that people just don't know about these self-taught artists. A documentary seemed like it would be a great way to get the word out.

**SB:** The impetus, the germ, came from Jill—to document self-taught artists through film. But we didn't want to make documentaries to make money, so we thought of a focus on education. The actual idea for the Foundation was almost a spontaneous realization, like an epiphany. We had an event at our house, and I think the head of the school district was there. Someone asked me why I liked the self-taught material. I said part of the reason is that the artists came from very difficult, modest environments, often in the poorest margins of our society—and that they were geniuses—and genius has no fences. That's very important. I believe in the equality of man and that if everyone is given equal opportunity, people can rise to their fullest potential. These self-taught artists are people who are geniuses, but they didn't have equal opportunity. They had to come a long way to be recognized. I felt that taking their stories and their art to primary and secondary schools could be very motivational. I also wanted to take it to the art community—university and curatorial—where many people are not familiar with these artists. Recently I had the experience where one major contemporary art curator had never heard of James Castle [1899–1977; fig. 8.8], whom I believe is one of the great artists of the



twentieth century. In fact, the first film the Foundation made was about Castle, and it's wonderfully serendipitous that the film was being made at the same time that the Philadelphia Museum of Art was organizing a major retrospective of his work.

**DM:** I know that the whole issue of terminology in the realm of self-taught/outsider art is really sticky, but when I saw your James Castle film, the primary thing it said to me is that Castle is an Artist—with a capital 'A', and that any other category he may be placed in is secondary.

**SB:** Absolutely, and we feel very strongly about that. This is contemporary art. We feel you must judge self-taught art by the same standards as you judge any contemporary art. And you judge these artists by the same standards you judge any artist. There's no exception for this. The same way, for example, that it was really important in the film not to stress the fact that Castle was deaf. Obviously his being deaf influenced his art, but that's as far as it goes. He was a brilliant artist and that's what's important, not that some deaf person made art, that's not what it's about. We talked with [exhibition curator] Ann Percy as she struggled with this issue in the title of the exhibition, and she came to the same conclusion. She thought of using something that suggested his deafness, like *The Silent World of James Castle*, but it wasn't the right message. She decided to call it *James Castle: A Retrospective*. So it was like any other great artist having a retrospective. That's why we think it's important that this work be in a museum like the Philadelphia Museum of Art that has all ranges of art. The best of this work is great contemporary art and should be shown with other great contemporary art. It's the works of both trained and untrained artists that constitute contemporary art.

**DM:** Are you still actively collecting self-taught art, along with working on the Foundation?

**SB:** Yes, what resonates with us, we are still actively acquiring.

**JB:** We're running out of space.

**SB:** Oh, we have all the space here at the firm's offices, and we just recently acquired an apartment in New York where we can add to our collection.

**DM:** Are you finding that there are new artists you are discovering and whose works you are acquiring, or is it primarily more works by the same artists?

**JB:** The latter. You know, some people who collect this work get in a truck and drive down South and go around and discover artists. We don't do it that way. The most recent discovery was James Castle, and that was at the Outsider Art Fair in New York about ten years ago.

**DM:** How do you actually define and delimit the art you collect?

**SB:** Well, terms are difficult. [Jean] Dubuffet [1901–1985], who started the movement, looked at art of the insane. He wanted to take the sophistication and what was trained out of the artist and get to the essence, the childlike qualities of the art. What we collect is much broader than art by people who have emotional disabilities—or any disabilities. We don't collect an artist because he or she has a disability; when the artist has a disability, like Castle who just happened to be deaf, it's accidental, just part of who they are. And we say we collect American self-taught art but we don't collect artists like Grandma Moses [1860–1961], although in the broader sense she was self-taught, as was Horace Pippin [1888–1946]. We have only a modest amount of self-taught material that is not American, but I think for us it's really about the rise of contemporary art and the relationship of the self-taught material to current contemporary art.

**DM:** Is what you are calling American self-taught art something that is specific to a time in history?

**SB:** It may well be—something from 1930 to, say, the 1970s or 80s. Only a few of these artists are alive today and they are not really coming to the fore.

**DM:** What do you feel about the Gee's Bend Quilts? [The exhibition *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the*



*Quilt* was then on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.]

**SB:** I happen to love the quilts . . . well, I don't love all the quilts, but I love the story behind them and especially the women who made them.

**DM:** Do you see them as self-taught art, or as folk art? What is this work to you?

**SB:** That's a great question—and I think the answer is, it's contemporary art, and the Museum is exhibiting it as contemporary art. It's almost abstract art; like a reviewer said, it can be seen like a Rothko. It goes to the definition of what is art. And it's interesting because these women are selling their art as bedspreads, and it's no different than Michael Graves or Jeff Koons selling a flowerpot—you put a flowerpot on the street and it's a flowerpot, put it in a museum and it's Art, and I think it's great that it can be recognized as art. It's the whole Duchampian thing . . . it gets rid of a lot of the snobbery. Bring in the quilters, hang great quilts on the museum wall, and it's important art.

**JB:** Galleries have been selling quilts for a long time. There aren't many things I'm sorry we didn't buy, but there is one—a quilt with the Lord's Prayer. Somebody had quilted it and the spelling was wrong, and the words ran into one another, and it was so beautiful. And Sheldon said—something you are never supposed to say—"Where will we put it?" It went to a museum.

**SB:** If we already had this floor [of the new Duane Morris headquarters] we could have put it here, but textiles are difficult.

**DM:** That takes me into the next question. Tell me about the kanthas. How did you come to collect something so different, neither self-taught, nor ceramic, nor contemporary?

**JB:** Well, Scott Rothstein, a textile artist and a good friend of ours, was living in India. He and his wife, Marcia Meckler, who is a psychiatrist working for the

U.S. Government, were doing their four years in Delhi. He had seen kanthas and he just fell in love with them and thought they would be something we would like. They were coming home to Philadelphia on a holiday and Scott asked if they could stay in our guesthouse. They arrived and he came over all excited saying, "You've got to see this art that I found there!" He showed us some kanthas he'd actually brought back and we loved them. Each one was different. Scott explained them to us, the stories, and how they were made. He said if we really liked them and wanted some he could get some for us; he said that he knew these runners who were always bringing him the material. So that was how it started. And then when he was back in India he would send us e-mails with photos and commentary like "this doesn't do the colors justice" . . . and he sort of edited them for us. We had collected a few when Sheldon decided that they would be wonderful here in the office and he asked Scott if he could get us about forty. Scott said, "Forty!"—but over a period of years he would send them to us. Then when we went to India a few years ago, Scott got a lot of them together for us to see and while we were there we picked out the ones we liked. We also bought some from the delightful Mr. Bharany in Delhi. Then we continued on back to collecting by e-mail.

**SB:** When I think about how we collected the kanthas, I think of a book on tape we just listened to titled *Blink*. The thesis of *Blink* is that you can make valid judgments, and maybe the best judgments, by reacting to something instantaneously rather than doing all the research and whatever . . . and sometimes the research and whatever you do almost clouds the validity of your original vision. It's the same thing with us and the kanthas, and with all art. Scott had a whole pile of kanthas and we didn't study them for hours, we just went through piles of them—"We really like this one, we're undecided about this . . ."—and within a matter of two or three hours we'd picked out about ten of them. Probably if we spent more hours or days doing it we would have come to the same conclusions. I've really learned to trust instincts, and of course you can make great mistakes, but I think a lot of this is emotional, instinctual.



**JB:** It's kind of visceral, you feel it.

**SB:** Yes, and once you feel something, generally that feeling doesn't change.

**JB:** You get that tingling. But now it seems sort of like the self-taught works. The supply of kanthas is drying up, the runners don't have them any more. It's really hard to find them, it's over.

**SB:** Basically, though, it was Scott scouring the countryside through these runners that got us the pieces, and he's told us that if we had come a few years later it wouldn't have been possible, we couldn't have put together a collection like this.

**DM:** I want to backtrack a bit. When you first saw kanthas, what attracted you to them?

**JB:** They had that same feeling as the self-taught art. Most of them were very colorful, and again they were the opposite of minimal, very intricate. And I love the sewing, the stitching. I love the asymmetrical aspect of them—one corner has one image, another has something else, you can't predict. I love that part. It's like the Gee's Bend quilts. I like the story of how they are made for utilitarian purposes, how they are passed down through the family and many different people work on them.

**DM:** How did you get information on their cultural context?

**JB:** Again from Scott. He actually had something Stella Kramrisch had written early on about them that he gave us. So I think I responded to them the same way I responded to our self-taught art. They seemed very similar to me, but using a different medium than the self-taught artists we collect.

**DM:** It's interesting that your collection doesn't only include the really quirky pieces that most easily relate to your self-taught works; rather, it runs the gamut of figural types available—including very precise, naturalistic drawing. Were you consciously looking for variety or was it just what turned up?

**JB:** I think it was both. I didn't want to keep getting the same thing over and over again. So it was conscious to have a wide range, and it was also the imagery, which imagery just appealed to us—that's what we really liked and responded to.

**DM:** Do you have a favorite piece or a favorite type?

**JB:** Well, I don't know because we've never had a place to really lay them out all together and look at them—I haven't seen them all together probably ever. As they came I would say, "Oh, I love that one!" or "I don't like that one quite as much," but I never really thought of them all together.

**SB:** I might have a favorite—the one with the writing all over it [see plate 74].

**JB:** Yes, I really love that one too.

**DM:** Did the types you like change at all or were you responding to the same kinds at the end of your collecting process as at the beginning?

**JB:** They didn't really change, although I think maybe our taste broadened. In the beginning I think the pieces were more internally coherent, and then we started being interested in different kinds of imagery and spreading out and responding to the variety.

**SB:** Some of the great examples we saw early on were very coherent, with fully formed patterns, very finished. And then later there were others that are much less finished. And I like them all. I don't regret buying any of them or wish we had others.

**DM:** How long did the process of collecting the kanthas take?

**JB:** Lets see—in about a four-year period (about 2000 to 2003) we probably collected them all.

**SB:** And then Scott also sent us a few images of *phulkaris* [floss-silk embroidered shawls from the Punjab], and we related to them. We said, "We like them, they are powerful, but we don't like the *baghs* ["garden" geo-



### A Note about Scott Rothstein

In 2000, fiber artist Scott Rothstein, a longtime friend of the Bonovitzes, moved to New Delhi to accompany his wife, Dr. Marcia Meckler, who was medical attaché of the Foreign Service assigned to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi from 2000 to 2004. Scott and Marcia had spent decades traveling and living in many parts of Asia and Latin America, exploring and collecting vernacular arts of all kinds as well as the work of living "traditional" artists.

Although they had encountered images of kanthas in books, it was in the galleries of the National Handicrafts Museum in New Delhi that

Scott's love affair with the genre began. At the museum he also met a family of kantha dealers. Over the next year they brought to his house many pieces for review, allowing him to touch, compare, and begin to understand the genre, as well as add some to his and Marcia's collection. Scott's understanding increased through contact with the refined eye of venerable Delhi collector-dealer Chhote Bharany, a longtime friend and former student of Stella Kramrisch, who freely shared his deep knowledge of and love of these textiles.

It occurred to Scott that many of the figural kanthas would appeal to Jill and Sheldon. Their enthusiasm was immediate, and, over the following years, Scott worked with them from the India side to form the collection. "It was the visual connection between outsider art and kantha that guided me in choosing pieces [to show] Jill and Sheldon. In particular, I would look for pieces that had figurative elements with an individual hand."

Scott soon realized that Jill and Sheldon were building a major collection that would one day come to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He wrote, "When I knew I was building something both for them and for the Museum, I was very motivated. In addition, during my time in India I came to see Stella . . . as a true visionary. While known for her work with classical Indian art, she also could see the simplest art forms were remarkable. Even today, things she collected and wrote about in the 1940s are not well known or taken seriously by scholars of Indian art, and that includes kanthas. So the fact that I was able to contribute to her endeavor is very meaningful to me. I met her only once . . . at Helen Drutt [English]'s gallery, where both Jill and I showed. . . . There are so many connections related to this project, which is really such a Philadelphia thing!" (e-mail to the author, January 18, 2009).



Fig. 8.9. Scott Rothstein at home in Delhi examining kanthas. Photograph courtesy Scott Rothstein



metric patterned], we really like the figural ones." And I said, "Gee, I can probably hang these in my office" and so I asked Scott to get me ten or twelve, and they're hanging in the lobby of our office in Philadelphia. Then I bought a few more for the firm and they are in our offices in other cities. In the New York office we have two *phulkaris* and a Japanese *yogi*, a garment, just hung on a wall, unframed, looks great.

**JB:** Scott opened our eyes to Indian textiles for sure, and now he's in Japan, and I must say my all-time favorite textiles are Japanese. And then he's going to Bangkok and we'll see what he discovers there, and Indonesia is another place he's been and I love Indonesian textiles. . . .

**SB:** Frankly, the problem with textiles is you can run out of space.

**DM:** When you went to India in 2003 did that change your impression of these textiles at all?

**SB:** It did mine. I think the kanthas have more meaning to me because we went to India, no question about it. We saw kanthas in the textile museum there [National Handicrafts Museum, New Delhi], but what we really saw were the Indian people. For example, you go to Varanasi, you go to the river . . . and you really get a sense of how important the religion is. A lot of that comes through in kanthas.

**JB:** I was so blown away by it. Everyone said it appeals to all of your senses and that is so true! The colors, the smells, the way people dress . . . painted vehicles, decorated elephants . . . an amazing place.

**SB:** What's amazing about India is that suddenly, in the midst of dust, women could be walking in a field,

and the colors they put together, and the way they dress. . . . It made me think about a woman working on a kantha in room maybe no bigger than this office, where a family lives, and spending hours, maybe over a period of years, putting together something that is then used functionally. And what I love about the kanthas is that the ideas come from the person's head . . . the images might be very common, but it's not like they look at a pattern, and I don't think any two kanthas look alike. It's that innate genius of putting together something that works as a piece of art, and yet obviously the initial thrust was something that was functional, or ceremonial, or a gift, or whatever. The Pre-Columbian pottery we have was all used either ceremonially or functionally. What I like about textiles and ceramics too is that they have a history that goes back thousands of years. There are some ceramics you can't tell whether they were made last year or a thousand years ago. There's a certain continuity and history that appeals to me. And frankly in ceramics what we like are the basic vessel forms that existed in past periods. . . . What we like are the very simple forms, not the ornate, sculptural types. Okay, that's a generalization, but it's the same in the textiles too. One thing I like about the kanthas is that they are used, worn, you can see that they were functional, and the women creating them made the patterns, they were artists.

**JB:** Being a ceramic artist, I really respond to the utilitarian part. I love it that I can make bowls and plates that people use . . . and the Gee's Bend quilts were used for their beds, and the kanthas were tablecloths, bedspreads, et cetera. That aspect of it ties it all together for me. And how beautiful to use all these hand-made, unique, and glorious works of art in your daily life!









# PLATE 53

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, split, running, straight, eye, and zig zag variation stitches

82 x 55 1/2 inches (208.3 x 141 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

A smorgasbord of auspicious motifs within an eccentric floral-stalk border covers the quilted ground of this joyful kantha. At bottom, two horses pull a great *ratha* (processional cart) of Jagannatha, its three happy deities housed in triangular towers topped by wildly waving flags and figures.<sup>1</sup> Along the right side, a fish-eating cat seems to lead a procession of domestic animals of

increasing scale.<sup>2</sup> An extraordinary variety of culinary and auspicious implements (all used in, although not exclusive to, wedding celebrations) fills the top and left quadrants.<sup>3</sup> Two combs,<sup>4</sup> a rectangular mirror, and a huge *tikli* (forehead pendant) cluster in the top center above triangular pieces of *pan* lying next to the *janti* (areca nut cutter) and areca nuts (also called betel nuts) used

in their preparation. *Jora mach* (paired fish) flank a *chimte* (tongs used to remove a cooking pot from the fire), shown with a circle of fish and *khunti* (spatula) at its center to represent the pot. In the middle left, in a striking instance of the kantha-maker's casual disregard for relative scale, an elaborate *hath pankha* (hand fan) dwarfs the tiny figure who raises an arm to hold it.<sup>5</sup>





# PLATE 54

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, satin, split, running, eye, dot, and zig zag variation stitches

70 x 59 inches (177.8 x 149.9 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Thin borders and stubby corner *kalkas* frame this large kantha. Its simple central lotus is ringed by heavily stitched rosettes, sprig-pointed petals, and stylized birds. Similarly stitched schematic lotuses, flowering trees, spirals, auspicious objects, and animals fill the remaining field. The objects include *churis* (bangles), *hatas* (ladles), *khuntis*, a *chimte*, a rectangular *janti*, and platters holding triangles that are either

sweets or savories. Animals include a small, blue fish-eating cat and a variety of other quadrupeds. The variously sized leaf shapes may be betel or ficus leaves or *kajallatas*.<sup>6</sup> Although more colorful and loosely composed than plate 53, with which it shares many motifs, the uniformly rendered and evenly spaced elements covering this quilt produce a far soberer effect.





# PLATE 55

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, chain, darning, split, running, straight, and dot stitches

69½ x 44 inches (176.5 x 111.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

A full surround of heart-shaped betel leaves encloses pinwheel-like swastikas (an ancient auspicious symbol) on the sides and delicately differentiated end motifs.

The airy central lotus, its outer petals punctuated with flying insects, sprouts, and birds, is pushed off-center by fish, indicating that the artist at least began the figural motifs after the borders and *kalkas* and before marking the placement of the lotus.

Yet this irregularity adds a naïve charm accentuated by the imagery. Among a host of human, animal, and plant forms is a large and especially potent checkered lion.<sup>7</sup> Many of the human figures display unusual pointed projections at their waists, indicating some sort of short garment.





# PLATE 56

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in chain, darning, running, seed, dot, and zig zag variation stitches

72 x 46 inches (182.9 x 116.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed: *Shri[---?] Shamandari Das [Shri/Mr (or Shrimati/Mrs.) Shamandari Das]*

This quilt displays a complex history of repairs and/or reworkings that significantly altered its composition. Its surface is comprised of three primary cloth panels stitched together lengthwise. Along their seams it is evident that the embroiderer attempted to conceal losses to the original kantha in a variety of ways. For example, she inserted a line of almond-shaped patches to hide the left seam, but frag-

ments of several whorl motifs remain visible. The inscription itself is interspersed with several leaf-shaped stitched fills that may replace letters. Actual woven borders<sup>9</sup> were used; their patterns show that they were recycled from four different garments (two patterns on the front and two on the back). Such woven patterns served as prototypes for the embroidered border patterns found on many kanthas.





# PLATE 57

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, running, double running, satin, chain, and fishbone stitches

73 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches (186.7 x 128.3 cm)

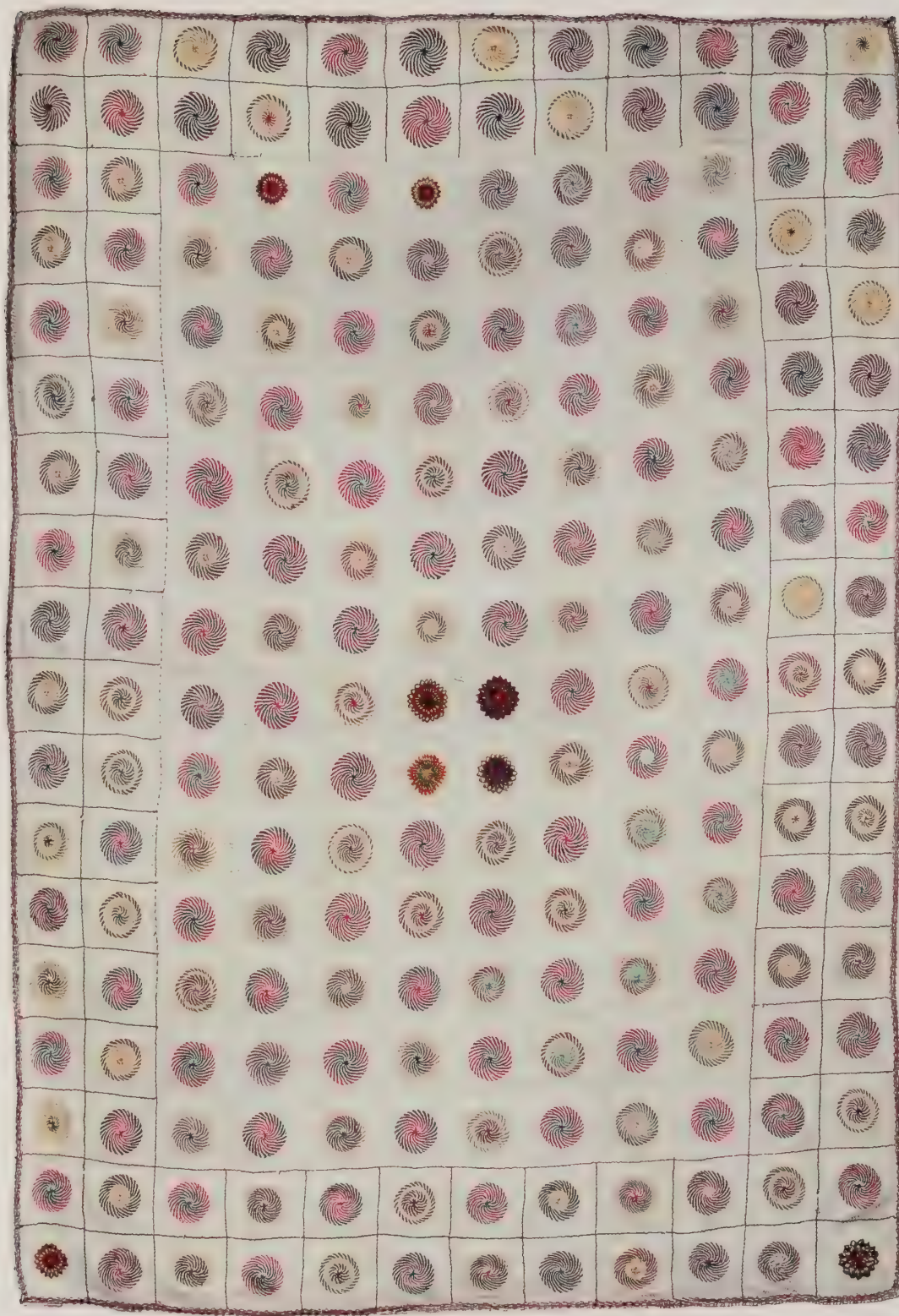
The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

A horse and an elephant anchor the central axis of this airy, well-ordered composition. Near each appear ritual implements that, while standard for Bengali *pujas*, are rarely depicted in *kanthas*. Above the horse is the oblong *kosha*, a shallow vessel usually made of metal and used to hold holy water and floral offerings. The embroiderer has chosen to depict it from above, as it is seen

by the worshiper, displaying the floating blossoms and triple leaves inside. Above and perpendicular to the *kosha* is the similarly shaped *kushi* (in red), used to sprinkle the water. In front of the elephant at the opposite end, a delicate red spiral closed by a point represents a *shankha* (conch shell), another common *puja* implement.<sup>9</sup> This is echoed by the elegant scrolling border sur-

rounding the entire *kantha*, which takes the form of an abstracted conch shell vine (*shankhalata*), and even by the central lotus, which incorporates the same shell form.<sup>10</sup>





# PLATE 58

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, running, and eye stitches  
70 x 48 inches (177.8 x 121.9 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Evenly spaced roundels cover a field of rich white ripples stitched in an overall box pattern, emphasized around the edges by a light grid suggesting borders. This embroiderer has used a rainbow of thread colors to distinguish each of her more than two hundred spiraling roundels from its neighbors. She creates further variety by substituting eight outlined and filled floral forms interspersed among the subtler whorls.

Despite their seeming incongruity and random placement, the undisturbed ground and uniformity of threads implies that these deviant roundels were not later repairs or additions, but played a vital role in the quilt's original design. Kanthas displaying a pattern of overall roundels (usually spirals, as here) seem to have been particularly popular during the second quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>





# PLATE 59

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in buttonhole, darning, running, double running, eye, arrowhead, seed, and zig zag variation stitches

72 1/4 x 50 1/4 inches (183.5 x 127.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

The pattern darning in the foliage and other motifs on this large and colorful quilt creates an almost lacelike effect. Above and below the central panel, a footed pot seems to generate the vines that fill the ground. These potted plants likely represent the *tulsi* (basil, an herb holy to Krishna) grown outside of many homes. Amid the foliage appear a butterfly, a fish, two *jantis* in a

uniquely Bengali shape,<sup>12</sup> and a cavorting family of four. The outer edge of the quilt displays a wave-patterned border and rippled edge.<sup>13</sup>





# PLATE 60

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery  
in back, darning, satin, dot, and single-  
sided stitches

77 1/4 x 56 inches (196.2 x 142.2 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Related to the previous kantha in its border treatment and simplified semi-solid forms, this quilt keeps the focus on its glorious three-dimensionality. The embroiderer interspersed rows of stitches in a combination of red and indigo at regular intervals in her otherwise white ground quilting to create a truly topographical effect. Motifs, including the faces of the figures, are done

in pattern darning that liberally intersperses white with the blue or red to give them a lacelike delicacy that heightens rather than overwhelms the invigorated ground. The flowering tree at the bottom, with alternating red and blue leaves and swirling branches, is balanced and carefully echoed at the top by a pair of peacocks with bicolored tail feathers and curving bodies.

Between the peacocks rises a pot with flowering foliage, perhaps a *tulsi* plant or miniature fruit-bearing tree; a second pot flanks the standing woman near the right border (see plate 59).





# PLATE 61

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery  
in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, and  
running stitches

80 1/2 x 51 inches (204.5 x 129.5 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

The theme of this delightful kantha is narrative. The three rainbow roofs of a monumental processional cart<sup>14</sup> reverberate with the tails of the two peacocks across from it. Below the colorful locomotive at the top, the artist has utilized the wave border to create a river by juxtaposing it with the rail bridge. Inside this wave border, rows of pattern-darned diamonds run down the long sides of the kantha, two on the right,

three on the left. Along the triple diamonds, as along a street, marches an elaborate wedding procession consisting of two elephants and two horses, all with riders; a flat and a round-topped *palki* (palanquin), each holding a seated couple; and two musicians accompanying the revelry on *dhol* (double drum) and *shenai* (long horn). This type of *palki* procession was common to Muslim and Hindu marriages and can still be seen

in parts of rural Bangladesh today.<sup>15</sup> The remaining space on the quilt is populated with lively vignettes such as two fruit-picking monkeys and a carnivorous parade of tiger, hyena, and leopard, the latter placed almost head-to-head with a line of bayonet-wielding soldiers.





# PLATE 62

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, running, seed, dot, and eye stitches

68 x 42 inches (172.7 x 106.7 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

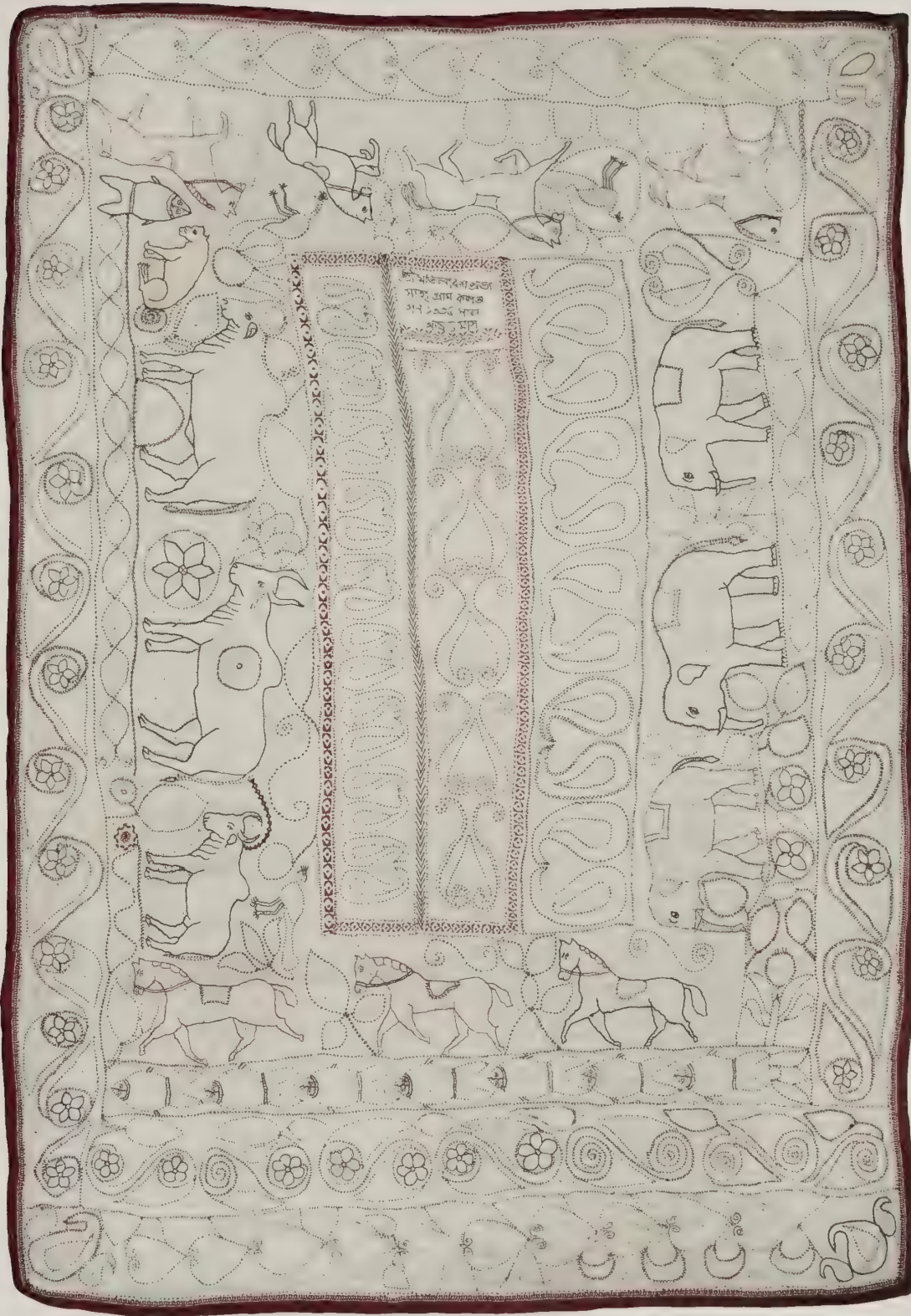
Inscribed: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare / Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*

Minimal borders, outlined motifs filled with simple running stitches, and a naturalistic drawing style contrast this quilt with plate 61 despite their common palette and iconography. The outlined forms, including

two tiny locomotives, quite possibly derive from illustrations in British children's books and other printed materials (compare the boars, camels, and small duck with the Persianate/Mughal motif of a hawk attacking a smaller bird). The large *ratha* in the center leaves no ambiguity about its sectarian affiliation. In its upper chamber stands a minutely ornamented Jagannatha trio, and

across the lower level are written the names of the god as chanted by Vaishnava devotees.<sup>16</sup> In the lower area appears the four-armed goddess Lakshmi lustrated by two storm-blue elephants that emphasize her role as bringer of prosperity.





# PLATE 63

Kalta (village), probably Dacca District,  
Undivided Bengal  
1928

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
buttonhole, darning, outline, running, and  
straight stitches

81 1/2 x 57 inches (207 x 144.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed: *shrimati laban[ya] praba / saha gram  
kalta / san 1335 sal / ashadh mash* [Shrimati/Mrs.  
Labanya Prabha, Kalta village, 1928, June-July]

The triple central panel of this kantha  
focuses and accentuates the inscription that  
tops it. This inscription gives the quilt par-  
ticular importance because it includes not  
only a woman's name, but also a date and

geographic location. Kalta village is most  
likely the town of the same name near the  
Padma River northwest of Dhaka (now  
within the Manikganj District of Dhaka Divi-  
sion, Bangladesh). The year 1928 accords  
well with the naturalistically outlined ele-  
phants, bridled horses, and cattle parading  
around the rectangular central panel, as  
well as the small lion crouched in one cor-

ner, all of which relate to printed illustra-  
tions that came into ever-wider circulation  
during the first quarter of the twentieth cen-  
tury. The ground stitching is done primarily  
in red rather than white, and monochrome  
woven borders are stitched around the quilt  
in lieu of border-patterned embroidery.





# PLATE 64

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in chain, satin, and running stitches

62 x 45 1/4 inches (157.5 x 114.9 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

In its linearity, this kantha appears to relate to plate 63, but the treatment of individual forms could not be more different. Rather than integrated, naturalistic line drawings, each motif on this quilt is built up of simple geometric shapes (compare the elephants). The blankness of the border might suggest

that it is unfinished, but because the motifs were completed, or at least outlined, before the background was stitched, that supposition is belied by the finished ground.





# PLATE 65

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in buttonhole, chain, darning, and dot stitches

61 x 39¼ inches (154.9 x 99.7 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

For minuteness and precision of stitching, few kanthas surpass this *dorukha* (double-sided) piece. The fine mustard-colored quilting blurs into an apricot background for the delicate blue-and-red motifs. Although the motifs are complex and fill the surface of the quilt, each is carefully corralled into its own panel and rendered with a simplicity that keeps the focus on the technique. The flat surface created by the fine stitches, uni-

form motifs, and precise layout resembles the best commercial revival work produced beginning in the late 1970s. However, nothing contradicts a significantly earlier date. A kantha collected in Jessore District during the 1930s and now in the Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta shows a similar treatment of motifs, flatness, and even the orange ground.<sup>17</sup>





# PLATE 66

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running, dot, basque knot (over buttonhole), double running, seed, and zig zag variation stitches

29½ x 21 inches (74.9 x 53.3 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed on left: *shrimoti brejesari krita* [Made by Shrimati/Mrs. Brajeshwari]

Unlike a number of kanthas that give a woman's name but do not specify her role, this piece explicitly states that it was made (*krita*) by Brajeshwari.<sup>18</sup> At first glance, its small rectangular shape and axial central tree suggest an Islamic prayer rug, but this

impression is quickly dispelled by Brajeshwari's vivacious imagery. She takes gleeful advantage of the possibilities for transparency, outlining all body parts before covering them with clothing, as in the case of the woman with her child, or overlaying a mount, as with the umbrella-toting man on an elephant (but not with the square-capped horseman). A second, smaller

woman in the upper right wears a very different type of outfit, including a long pleated skirt with scalloped hem, possibly the popular drawstring full skirt (*ghagra*) usually worn with a short blouse.





# PLATE 67

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, running, eye, seed, and zig zag variation stitches

75 x 53 inches (190.5 x 134.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Two lengths of a garment, one full and one cut in half, with their woven red borders intact give this kantha its distinctive linear subdivision. Above small corner *kalkas* set within a wide chevron border appear four trees, each rising from a base topped by a double spiral. Between the pair on the right run two panels; each holds a long betel

vine also originating from a double spiral. A single vine of a different sort fills the entire space on the left. The central panel at the top holds a few birds and a mass of generically rendered fish whose different body shapes and fin configurations nevertheless seem intended to represent a variety of species. The *pièce de résistance*,

however, is the glorious banana tree just below the fish, shown complete with a ripening regime of fruit, from which hangs the asymmetrical heart-shaped flower, a delicacy in the region.





# PLATE 68

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, satin, fishbone, and eye stitches  
71 x 47 1/2 inches (180.3 x 120.7 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

This light-filled quilt, like the one on the page opposite, glories in the diversity of the natural world. The realistically rendered pink lotus at center is surrounded by a leaf-like wave pattern and an outer ring with distinctive floral scroll. In their linearly shaded petals and crosshatched centers, these red-and-blue flowers are reminiscent

of madder and indigo block-printed fabrics. Additional large pink-and-blue lotuses top the airy corner *kalkas*. A uniform woven border is stitched around the front of the piece.<sup>19</sup> Its two lines of patterning, one in red of tiny *kalkas* and blossoms, the other in light blue showing small vertical *kalkas*, perfectly complement the embroidery.





# PLATE 69

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, outline, running, eye, and dot stitches

61 x 45½ inches (154.9 x 115.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

The central rectangular panel shows a mass of seemingly arbitrary but actually well-balanced animals around a small five-pointed lotus. At each corner of this panel is a different type of tree. The embroider has worked hard to observe and depict their distinctive characteristics, for example distinguishing the fanlike fronds of the toddy palm (upper right) from the long fronds of the areca nut palm (lower left).

Among the borders surrounding this central panel is one containing a row of fish bounded by wavy lines that gives the feeling of a river surrounding a lush body of land. While the whole ground is quilted, the fish border and an outer border of roundels subtly wrapped in an undulating scroll use colored thread to further accentuate the sense that the entire composition depicts a fluvial island.





# PLATE 70

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in

back, darning, running, and dot stitches

68 x 45½ inches (172.7 x 115.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Linear imagery in blue, red, and yellow delicately enlivens the richly rippling ground.

Around a simple embroidered border, this kantha is bound with strips of woven border in two patterns, one for the short sides, the other for the long. Between the petals of the starlike central lotus appear birds in flight, something rarely depicted in kan-

thas. The embroiderer's emphasis, however, is clearly duality. Facing pairs of animals abound, such as paired birds in each lotus petal and within the scroll ringing it, two pairs of horses (one pair tethered to a tree, the other held by a treelike man), and multiple pairs of large birds, including one within a double-arched arcade.





# PLATE 71

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
outline, running, and knot stitches  
69 x 45½ inches (175.3 x 115.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

A large interior rectangle is composed of square blocks subdivided by pillars that frame busts of men and women alternating with birds. The motif of rows of niches containing busts, often in European dress, appears in the region's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century terra-cotta temples, most likely adopted from a European source.<sup>20</sup> The figures here, however, wear Bengali dress, although that of the men may be

somewhat archaic. The unusual array of creatures ringing the central lotus includes a pair of prawns along with two birds and two rodentlike creatures that the embroiderer has detailed with diagonal parallel lines in imitation of the prawns. Two distinct shades of red thread appear to have been used for the embroidery throughout, and the piece itself is edged with a monochrome red woven border.





# PLATE 72

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery  
in back, buttonhole, chain, satin, and  
running stitches

8½ x 24¼ inches (21.6 x 61.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Small rectangular kanthas such as this one are often termed *arshilatas* (literally, “mirror covers”), although they vary in proportions and may well have been intended for a wider range of functions. The mirror (*arshi* or, more commonly, *ayina*) is important in Bengali marriage rites not only as one of the bride’s personal objects, but also

because the groom holds one in his hand through parts of the ceremony, and may look into it to apply *sindur* (red powder) to his wife’s hair to signify her married state. The sensibility and design of this piece relate closely to the two tiny squares in the Kramrisch Collection (see plates 12, 13).





# PLATE 73

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, satin, split, zig zag variation, herringbone, close herringbone, seed, and star stitches

69½ x 46 inches (176.5 x 116.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

The narrative imagery on this glorious quilt—perhaps the most iconographically loaded kantha in the Bonovitz Collection—does not depict the lives of gods and heroes, but rather daily life in nineteenth-century Bengal. At left, the upper portion of a female figure beneath an arch supported by classical pillars is clearly one of the large clay *puja* icons created for Bengali festivals honoring the goddess in her various forms,

here set within a domestic shrine. This image is flanked by pot-bellied priests as well as worshipers, some sporting the upturned “Prince Albert” hairstyle popular among Bengal’s urban gentry during the second half of the nineteenth century, and often seen in Kalighat paintings. The celebration continues with the musicians in the lower border and perhaps also with the women on the right side panel.<sup>21</sup>





# PLATE 74

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in darning, outline, satin, split, running, and zig zag variation stitches

79 x 61 inches (200.7 x 154.9 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed: *Hare Rama / Hare Krishna / Krishna Krishna / Hare Hare* [etc.]

Repeatedly saying or writing the name or names of god is a common Hindu practice.<sup>22</sup> For devotees of Vishnu, the typical iteration includes a standardized sequence of Hare (Vishnu) together with Krishna and Rama, the names of his principal avatars (literally

"descents"). This sequence of names is often block printed in a repeating pattern on garments. The printing or stitching of these holy names earns the maker spiritual merit while providing the user with the god's blessings and protection. This large quilt displays concentric rings of border patterns, much like the uniformly patterned surfaces of popular *par tola* quilts. The embroiderer

has left space between the rings in which to stitch the mantra. Variations in the order and rhythm of the words show that she is not overly concerned with maintaining any uniform sequence, but rather focused on the beauty and coherence of the design.





# PLATE 75

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, chain, darning, outline, satin, and running stitches

77 x 62 1/2 inches (195.6 x 158.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed (clockwise from top): *dhama kari pari-name / pabe narayan / niriye basati / hobe pape dile man\** [Narayana (Krishna/Vishnu) is attained in proportion to one's dharma (appropriate or

righteous actions); if the mind is trapped in illusion (error), all (one's place in the world) is lost]; *aksanda mandala karang bya kta [byakta]*—— [not clear] *cha ra char [charachar] tadapad / darshita yena taswayi shri guru re [gurure] namah\*\** [The whole world is under the feet of the guru. I surrender myself at his feet and bow in obeisance.]; *jina diyo man chine / diyo man agete ama /\*\* r [amar amar] ama r sheshe ayatan* [Know before you give your heart, know (him) before you give your heart. At the beginning (he says he is) mine mine. Afterwards neglect.]; *krita / shrimatir mohit kumari chanda* [Made by

Shrimati/Mrs. Mohit Kumari Chanda]; *satir kathanta ne [kathantare] tare bali / pati pati pade thake man / tare bali sati.\** [The husband who has thoughts of his wife within him is a true husband. The wife whose thoughts lie at her husband's feet is a true wife.]<sup>23</sup>

The corners of Mrs. Chanda's extraordinary kantha display a quartet of fabulously explicit, rainbow-leaved trees (clockwise from lower left: a banyan, ficus, pineapple plant, and areca nut palm). The cow and nursing calf and elephants with nestled

trunks display equally sensitive observation.<sup>24</sup> A long-haired man in a pantalooned outfit resembling early Portuguese costume but composed of intersecting border designs appears opposite another European figure with a hunting dog who points his gun at a gloriously fearsome patterned lion. The heavily stitched corner *kalkas* with their gray thread and overlaid colors may be modeled on embroidered "Kashmir" shawls favored for the European market.





# PLATE 76

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in buttonhole, chain, darning, satin, split, running, and fishbone stitches

73½ x 38¼ inches (186.7 x 97.2 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

While most kanthas in these collections use embroidered patterns on their borders that replicate woven border patterns, this piece and the very different quilt on the opposite page utilize such patterns to generate virtually all of their motifs. Here each block of an extensive grid contains a single image, outlined and then filled with colorful and cleverly varied patterning. The blocks are reminiscent of the figural terra-cotta blocks sheathing local brick temples,<sup>25</sup> although the composition is here given a centripetal emphasis by the orientation of the motifs around an oversized central lotus. Two squares along the right border contain pineapples, a rarely seen motif. The white

quilting of the ground is done with unusually widely spaced lines of running stitches. Sketches visible around many of the motifs indicate that the artist intended some of the figures to be even more elaborate.





# PLATE 77

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, darning, outline, satin, running, eye, seed, surface satin, dot, and zig zag variation stitches  
65½ x 44 inches (166.4 x 111.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

While no fully standardized vocabulary exists for the multifarious border patterns found in kanthas, most terms derive from a motif's resemblance to an everyday item. Thus the outer border here is based on the *chokh*, or eye, motif, the next red strip on the *barfi*, named for a diamond-shaped sweet, while the third might be named for its resemblance to the heart-shaped betel leaf. Many other border patterns are used

to make the motifs that fill the field of this kantha, including the magnificent peacock tail and monumental processional cart. In a line on the left appears a collection of objects typically used during marriage rituals, including a rectangular *janti*, a betel leaf, and, just below it, a *kajallata* of the same heart shape.





# PLATE 78

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, darning, and running stitches  
7 1/2 x 18 1/4 inches (19.1 x 46.4 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

A large figure wearing a red skull cap stands with legs splayed and arms raised. His detailed face shows not only a curling mustache below his red nose, but also a distinct beard. The cap and beard indicate that the embroiderer might be depicting a Muslim man, perhaps of a fishing community (*jola*). With his left hand this man

grasps an oval object on a thin handle, possibly a net, satchel, or toddy pot, while his right hand grasps a long, wiggling object, perhaps a waving scarf, eel, or snake. A smaller, hairless male figure in the upper right displays a similar posture and is either empty-handed or holding one of the fish above him.<sup>26</sup> Their egg-shaped bodies are

detailed with a curved line below high, rounded breasts, as if depicting a continuous pectoral muscle or thoracic cavity.





# PLATE 79

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, chain, darning, satin, running, straight, and zig zag variation stitches

34 x 32 1/2 inches (86.4 x 82.6 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

In this *alpana*-like *kantha*, seven men and seven women, all with their right arms raised (and one man with both arms raised), stand across from each other in what is likely a group dance on the occasion of a wedding.<sup>27</sup> Between the women's heads float golden ornaments; between the men appear what might be bound sheaves of grain. The rectangle quartered into dif-

ferently colored triangles on the left is seen in *alpanas* related to marriage and certain *pujas*.<sup>28</sup> Around this *kantha* are aquatic creatures of explicitly differentiated species. Most unusual are the long-bodied blue catfish with feathery fins in the lower left, which might be a *boal*, and the bulbous pink one opposite, which is perhaps a Ganges dolphin (with its peculiarly

elongated mouth shown open). The pair of fish directly above the heads of the men are likely *hilsa*, king of the Bengali table and favored in most ritual as well as culinary contexts.<sup>29</sup>





# PLATE 80

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, buttonhole, chain, darning, split, running, straight, and dot stitches

33 x 33 inches (83.8 x 83.8 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Inscribed at right of central square: *shrimati nipumayi dasya* [Shrimati/Mrs. Nripamayi(?), servant (devotee) of god (Krishna)]

This kantha is composed of four concentric squares. The *kalkas* in the corners of the outer three squares draw the eye inward. Rather than a lotus, however, the center square enshrines Krishna with Radha by his side. The god is bright blue but for his face,

hands, and garment; he holds a flute to his lips, its trumpetlike end breaking out of the frame. Radha's pink sari is worn without the blouse that had become common by the end of the nineteenth century. It is wrapped in Bengali fashion with the *anchal* (end piece) pulled forward and across her breasts. The embroiderer has stitched her own name in red along the border to Radha's left, where it is visually discrete yet

decidedly within the "sanctum sanctorum," just as builders and designers inscribed their names in the sancta of terra-cotta temples. The surrounding square holds a pair of *makaras*, two pairs of peacocks, and two pairs of fish, suggesting the forested riverbanks of holy Vrindavan now transported to Bengal. The fish exhibit evidence of early repairs, including patches cut from other kanthas.





# PLATE 81

Undivided Bengal

Second half of the nineteenth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
buttonhole, chain, satin, running, and dot stitches

8½ x 18½ inches (21.6 x 47 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Two patterned strips divide this short *arshi-lata* into thirds. Feathery corner *kalkas* dominate both side sections, but squeezed above them are multiple images of Krishna playing his flute. In the two axial images, Krishna crosses his foot in the iconic posture of the Cowherd Lord (Gopala). On one side he stands alone; on the other, Radha

appears by his side. Perpendicular to the latter is a third image of Krishna, this time seated on a stool. Across from him, a *gopi* with a hand fan attends the divine couple. She, like the two *gopis* on the opposite side, arches her ornamental head covering above her.<sup>30</sup>





# PLATE 82

Undivided Bengal

Twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
buttonhole, chain, darning, and running stitches  
46 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches (118.1 x 69.9 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Neat white background quilting surrounds unusually bold motifs. As seams and junctures reveal, this piece was reconstructed from a larger quilt. While the graphic shapes at first seem unlike any others in the collections, close variations of most of the seven border designs are found among the larger oeuvre, and even the solid,

almost appliquélike quality finds precedents.<sup>31</sup> The range of subjects (horse and elephant riders, insects, peacocks and other birds, etc.) is standard for kanthas, although the forms are certainly curious; it is difficult, for instance, to find examples of featureless black heads or a betel-leaf shape used in lieu of an umbrella or fan.





# PLATE 83

Undivided Bengal

First half of the twentieth century

Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in back, chain, darning, satin, running, cross, and dot stitches

77 x 52 1/2 inches (195.6 x 133.4 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

While this quilt conforms to the typical organizational structure of a central eight-petaled lotus contained by a series of borders, a closer examination reveals interesting yet puzzling arrangements of a remarkable array of male figures—some with mustaches or beards—standing, seated, on horseback or elephant, as well as alternating with a floral motif along the wide inner border. To the right of the lotus

two seated men face what may be a small shrine, while a hunchbacked man leans on a stick alongside anthropomorphized tigers. The shrine and the large, rampant tiger in the upper left suggest that this scene may reference the tigers' saint, Satya Pir.<sup>32</sup> *Gazi patas* (narrative scroll paintings) depicting the exploits and ultimate power of Satya Pir often include scenes of worshipers at small shrines.<sup>33</sup> In one of many distinct regional

variations, this popular saint appears slightly stooped with a staff in hand.<sup>34</sup> The left panel of this kantha is bracketed by two heraldic men on horseback oriented toward an archer pursuing a spotted deer with a group of men in between, but the larger story here remains obscure.

—Katherine Hacker





# PLATE 84

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, chain, darning, outline, split,  
running, staggered running, stem stitch  
shading, eye, and dot stitches  
64 1/4 x 41 3/4 inches (163.2 x 106 cm)  
The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

The maker of this kantha seems to glory in depicting modern life, although some motifs may also illustrate a narrative. In the upper right, a woman stands within a grand residence detailed with gas sconces and arched louvers. In the upper left, she or another woman sits surrounded by mostly aquatic creatures in a square representing a *ghat* (stepped riverbank platform).<sup>35</sup> In the lower

section appear two steam-driven vehicles—a train and a peacock-prowed pleasure boat (*mayurpankhi*). Below these, a horseman and elephant rider flank an elaborate market scene, including one woman who negotiates with a merchant as he weighs her purchases on a scale. In contrast to the usual sari draped over the head, the women here wear long-sleeved blouses,

separate head-coverings, and long necklaces that more resemble the outfits seen in the hill region of northern Bengal.





# PLATE 85

Undivided Bengal

Late nineteenth or early twentieth century  
Cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery in  
back, buttonhole, darning, satin, running,  
arrowhead, eye, fern, cross, open fishbone,  
point russe, and zig zag variation stitches  
85 x 56 inches (215.9 x 142.2 cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

Wave and floral scroll patterns surround this carefully compartmentalized and multi-colored quilt. Two squares to either side of the central lotus show *kalkas* surrounded by a range of tiny figures, many of which illustrate the types of transportation available in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Bengal. In the lower right square, a locomotive pulls two passenger cars while its engineer uses a *kula*-shaped coal shovel.

In front of the train, a figure with raised arms stands within a shrinelike arched structure topped by a flag that may actually represent a railroad switching post. In the lower left square, an iconlike figure rises between spoked circles, perhaps denoting a bicyclist, while nearby a line of men carry variously shaped *palkis* (palanquins).



## NOTES

1. Their shape and size indicate that they may represent the huge cloth towers of the most famous of all Jagannatha *rathas*, that used in the massive annual festival held in Puri, Orissa.

2. From right to left (top to bottom) they are a goat, cow, horse, water buffalo, and elephant. The fish-eating cat is a motif popular in Kalighat painting, said to satirize a greedy priest; a small rodent appears above its head and a kite below its belly.

3. The pyramidal form fronted by two auspicious stick figures may be one of several items used in weddings and other rituals, including an ornamented conical rice-mound (*shri*), an A-frame rack for hanging leaves and other offerings, or a triangular hanging woven of the first rice. The large rectangles with central crosses (seven around the central lotus plus five smaller and two irregular ones scattered in other locations) replicate a motif found in *alpanas* for weddings and for various *pujas*, and may or may not relate to the pyramidal motif just discussed (see also plates 26, 79). They also resemble *pidis*, the wooden boards on which the bride and groom sit or stand during the ceremony (see Mason, "Background Texture," this volume; see also plates 26, 79).

4. One is a half-round comb worn as a hair ornament, the other a long comb for grooming. These two comb types are paired in other *kanthas*. See Zaman, "Women's Words / Women's Voices in the Kantha," and Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions,'" this volume. The elongated leaf-shaped object below the double fish may be the bride's *kajallata* (holder for cosmetic lamp black, often with a hinged, leaf-shaped, spoonlike container; see note 6 below). A *kajallata* and *janti* are both carried by the bride and often stuck in her hair; see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," this volume.

5. The long-tailed creature with spotted blocks on its body next to the *janti* is a stylized rendition of a human-faced lion; a smaller, simplified version appears below the head of the fish-eating cat.

6. A *kajallata* is a bottle or holder for *kajal* (lampblack), used to ornament and disinfect the eyes. The bride carries a *kajallata* during the wedding ceremony. *Kajal* is also regularly used under the eyes and on the foreheads of babies and young chil-

dren, and so plays a role in childhood ceremonies such as that celebrating the first feeding of solid food (*annaprasana*). For other implements, see also plate 53.

7. In heraldic terms he is passant, guardant, armed and pizzled (the latter emphasized by its bright red tip). Just above the lion's back, a four-branched tree holds two standing figures, a somewhat common motif in the regional repertoire and usually labeled as a dual image of Krishna, possibly reflecting the *vastraharana*. The dual image of Krishna with his brother Balarama, common in Kalighat paintings and other images from the region, may be overlaid here, as may the somewhat less common image (although found in temple terra-cottas) of Krishna's youthful feat of splitting the Yamalarjuna tree to release the trapped sons of Kubera, in which the sons commonly appear together in the split tree.

8. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing," this volume; cf. the uniform border on plates 31 and 67, the latter of which remains part of the original cloth.

9. The *shankha* is often drilled as a horn or left undrilled as a water vessel. *Shankha* and *kosha-kushi* are ubiquitous in Bengal, used by priests in temples as well as lay worshipers in their homes. See Mason, "Background Texture"; Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," this volume.

10. For the central motif, see Tapanmohan Chatterji, *Alpona: Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1948), pp. 52–53.

11. For example, one such piece, made for the current owner as a baby, may thus be dated with certainty to 1934 (personal communication from Ruby Palchoudhuri, Kolkata, 2009).

12. The half-rounded *janti* with curved top projection is a form popular in Bengal but not in other areas. Other shapes, such as a long rectangular form (see plate 77), were also in use in the region during this period.

13. This rippling border appears in a number of Bonovitz pieces, but in none of those in the Kramrisch Collection. However, several unpublished works in the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata, do show such an edge, indicating that it is not of recent invention.

14. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," for the possibility that this is a Muslim *taziya* rather than a Hindu *ratha*.

15. See Mason, "Background Texture."

16. See Zaman, "Women's Words." From right to left, the deities are Jagannatha-Krishna, his sister Subhadra, and his brother Balarama. For the inscription, see also plate 74. The embroiderer has used commas to separate the names as they are spoken. This English practice, along with certain other English pronunciation marks, was introduced into written Bengali from the mid-nineteenth century by the educator-reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), but only gradually came into common usage.

17. For a black-and-white photograph of this piece, captioned "Lep Kantha, Dist. Jessore, Bangladesh, Acc. No. T. 5921," see Asis K. Chakrabarti, *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (Kolkata: Gurusaday Museum, 2000), p. 198, plate 108.

18. See also plate 75.

19. See Peranteau, "A Many-Splendored Thing."

20. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal."

21. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal." Other figures along this row include a green head inverted within dense, encircling vines and two soldiers who rest on mustard-colored guns.

22. Chanting mantras and singing *bhajans* that repeat lists of divine names, which are often forms of a deity, is perhaps the most frequent ritual act in Hinduism, and one shared by many other religious traditions.

23. Niaz Zaman was assisted in transcribing these difficult inscriptions by Dr. S. Kumar Biswas and Dr. Rezaul Karim of the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka (indicated by \*), and by Dr. Akimun Rahman, Independent University, Bangladesh, Dhaka (indicated by \*\*). We also thank these scholars for their work in translating this inscription. The first line has been somewhat altered from Dr. Rahman's original translation ("If one is pious, one will get God [heaven], but if one gives oneself to sin, one will go to hell") to more pointedly alert the reader to the invocation of the Hindu Narayana.

24. Also of note is the fact that the horses' bodies hide the equestrians' legs.

25. See Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal."

26. If the object is a satchel, the red-capped man may instead be some type of fakir (Hindu religious mendicant). Likewise, the shaved head may indicate that the smaller man is an ardent follower of Chaitanya, but the connection with fish and, perhaps, a

fisherman might show that such holy figures are here ridiculed as craving the company of women and fish, rather than pursuing appropriate abstinence. Such caricatures of Vaishnavas appear in Kalighat paintings and popular literature.

27. While the grain might indicate that the dance is at the time of the harvest festival, the fish, jewelry, and crossed square make the occasion of a wedding more likely. See also plates 23, 26.

28. See note 3 above. See also *Alpana* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960), especially figs. 24, 29, 34, 40, 41; and Chatterji, *Alpona*.

29. The *boal* or great white sheatfish (*wal-lago attu*) is a river fish that can grow up to eight feet in length, although this might be another type of catfish. The Ganges River dolphin (*platanista gangetica gangetica*) is a rare freshwater dolphin unique to this region. Although the stitched pink fish somewhat resembles depictions of *makaras* in *kanthas*, that it is not a *makara* is clear from a *kantha* in the Zainul Abedin Collection, Dhaka (published in Sila Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha* [Kolkata: Ananda, 2003], p. 301, plate 349), that depicts a *makara* across from this creature. *Hilsa* or *ilish* (*tenulosa ilisha*) are a type of shad and the national fish of Bangladesh. *Hilsa* have symmetrically convex bodies, notched tails, and single short dorsal fins but no features that allow their embroidered forms to be differentiated easily from those of many other species.

30. The palette with its distinctive gray-green, the contained but dense stitching, and the general design sensibility relate this piece to an unpublished *kantha* in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata, labeled as (and likely collected in) Sobhana, Khulna District.

31. For example, the *kalka* border pattern resembles that in plate 47, while the conch-shell scroll may be found in plates 57 and 60, among others.

32. See Hacker, "In Search of 'Living Traditions.'"

33. In addition to the *Gazi patas* in the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata, both the Victoria and Albert and the British Museum in London have collections of *patas* assembled by W. G. Archer and J. C. French, an Indian Civil Service officer stationed in Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s. A large figure of Satya Pir dominates the opening



panel of a scroll from the Santal Parganas dated to about 1930, with the lower third showing a group of men at a triangular-shaped shrine topped by a trifoliate form. A second *pata* by a Jadupatua painter from the Dumka subdivision of the Santal Parganas also depicts Satya Pir in the first panel; directly below are two bearded and standing worshipers flanking a tall, narrow shrine. See *Indian Court Paintings from Court, Town and Village* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1970–72), cats. 70,

75, 76; see also T. Richard Blurton, "The 'Murshidabad' Pats of Bengal," in *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*, ed. Jyotindra Jain (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1998), pp. 42–55.

34. This portion of the early-eighteenth-century *Satyanarayanera Vratakatha* goes on to describe Satya Pir as Lord Hari, who descends to Earth and takes the form of a fakir with a beard and mustache, and wearing a patchwork wrap and a cap. See Tony K. Stewart, "Satya Pir: Muslim Holy Man

and Hindu God," in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 580–81, 584.

35. In the *Manasamangal* (see Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal"; see also plate 11), one of Behula's adventures as she rafts her dead husband down the river involves a woman at a *ghat*. This, together with the woman in the elaborate house, might suggest that the embroiderer of this kantha is depicting Behula's trials. However, the

absence of snakes throws such an identification into question. A kantha in the Abedin Collection (see Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Kantha*, p. 254, plate 264) shows a man inside a similar house who may represent Behula's husband Lakhindar; however, the house has a horizontal gas light projecting from the building, rather than a snake entering the wall (as in plate 11). Across from this house in the Abedin kantha is a woman on a *ghat* along with a man with what appears to be a net, as well as a variety of animals.



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Seventy years ago, Stella Kramrisch's article "Kanthā" catapulted these everyday quilts into the realm of international art historical discourse. After moving to Philadelphia, she set the precedent for displaying South Asia's vernacular arts in a fine arts museum in her 1968 *Unknown India* exhibition, and gave permanence to this notion by her gifts and bequest of her collection to the Museum and the city. It is wonderful to note that during the run of *Unknown India* Anne d'Harnoncourt was a newly arrived curatorial assistant at the Museum. Thirty-five years later, when the Bonovitzes proposed this exhibition and catalogue, she had been the Museum's Director for over two decades. Her enthusiasm for the project was immediate; would that she could be here to see it come to fruition. She is greatly missed by us all.

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Lahiri (1933–2009), who was born in what is now Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh, could not live to see this publication and exhibition. My perpetual thanks to him and his wonderful wife, Krishna, for their encouragement, and especially for the memorable day in Kolkata when we thought about kanthas together.

The four contributing authors—Pika Ghosh, Katherine Hacker, Anne Peranteau, and Niaz Zaman—have together transformed this publication from a “mere” exhibition catalogue into a major, groundbreaking contribution to the literature on this art form. Anne Peranteau valiantly dove into the complexities of South Asia, beginning the project in Philadelphia, continuing it in North Carolina, and fielding queries with good humor from New Zealand. Niaz Zaman is legendary in the realm of kantha scholarship, and we are truly honored that she participated in this project. Her professionalism under extremely trying working conditions—as when Dhaka was under curfew and packages vanished in transit—truly impressed us all. We also thank her for her enormous help in transcribing and translating all inscriptions, and for soliciting the expert advice of scholars in Dhaka on the most problematic (for changes and errors, however, I take full responsibility). Katherine Hacker's exceptional ability to question assumptions by “reading between the lines” is demonstrated by her wonderful historiographic writings, now including the essay in this volume. She peels back the layers of history to reveal the richness of the world in which Kramrisch was writing and collecting, and which continues to color our vision of this material so many years later. Pika Ghosh was initially contracted to write an essay on iconography but said she wanted as well to look at the importance of these textiles today via her own family in Calcutta. When we received her exquisite “Rags to Riches” essay, we urged her not to touch a word and insisted that she write a second piece to provide a review of the iconography. What resulted was the monumental

and cutting-edge “Embroidering Bengal,” which together with the first work comprise a book in themselves. Yet however crucial to this work their writings are, Pika's and Katherine's contributions to this catalogue go far, far beyond the essays bearing their names. Both have been involved from the beginning in the fundamental research on the two collections. Learning about the visual language of kanthas both from and with Pika has been a glorious experience for me, and her linguistic assistance as well as multiple reviews of the plate entries have been invaluable. Katherine was not only the supreme Bangladesh travel companion, but also flew in at the eleventh hour to spend a stimulating if grueling week reviewing each quilt, questioning each of my unfounded assumptions, and finalizing the entries. While the entries could never have been produced without them, and while I thank them as both friends and collaborators, all errors are very much my own.

Great thanks always to the many wonderful members of the greater Philadelphia South Asian community who have supported the Museum's initiatives so often and so wholeheartedly. Their collaboration is key, and their appreciation our greatest reward. A final thanks for inspiration to artist and vernacular art scholar Mr. Haku Shah and his wonderful wife, Vilu. Not only did Hakubhai provide invaluable reminiscences of Stella Kramrisch, with whom he collaborated to create *Unknown India*, but watching he and Viluben relive more than a half century together as they gleefully unfolded layer after layer of a quilt Vilu had made of her old saris truly brought home to me the power of rags. As Hakubhai said, “What I like about all this is that it is more than an object. It is a part of life. In the end, it is the process, and it is the use.”

DARIELLE MASON

*The Stella Kramrisch Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art*







